THE CHARM OF SKYE

THE WINGÈD ISLE

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BY

SETON GORDON

Author of "The Immortal Isles," etc.

WITH A FOREWORD BY

MACLEOD OF MACLEOD, C.M.G.

TWENTY-THIRD CHIEF OF THE CLAN

FOUR PLATES IN COLOUR AND MANY

PENCIL DRAWINGS BY

FINLAY MACKINNON

ALSO

SIXTEEN PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR

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FOREWORD

Everybody in Scotland and most people in England know the name of Seton Gordon as a keen and competent Naturalist, a man who spends hours when most people are in bed, and days (or weeks if necessary), studying the habits of wild animals. Skye is an ideal field for such a man. The Cuillin, that magnificent range of hills described by Sir Walter Scott as "rivalling in grandeur and desolate sublimity anything the Highlands can produce," abounds in inaccessible crags, where the golden eagle can still rear its young in safety, while the precipitous cliffs which line the shore in many parts of Skye provide safe nesting-places for the peregrine falcon. Mr Seton Gordon is also a lover of the pipes, and a noted player himself of the pibroch. He will, no doubt, be able to place on record some account of that celebrated school for pipers at Boreraig, presided over by the MacCrimmons. Skye formerly produced many first-class pipers. May it do so again. There are many interesting books on the island of Skye, but I am sure that Mr Seton Gordon, who spends much of his time in Skye, and is a lover of Legend and History, will have much to say in *The Charm of Skye* that has not been said before.

N. M. MacLeod of MacLeod.

Dunvegan Castle,
Christmas 1928.

PREFACE

Skye is a large island, and this book does not profess to be the history of an isle where romance and beauty are always near, but if these pages bring before the reader, even vaguely, the charm of the largest of the Hebrides, they will have served their purpose. Many good friends in Skye have given me their help in the writing of this book. To Sir Robert Bruce, of the *Glasgow Herald*, I am indebted for finding a home for a number of the chapters which here appear in book form. Other papers, *The Scotsman* especially, have helped *The Charm of Skye* on its way. The Foreword is by one who is revered throughout the West.

Seton Gordon.

Duntulm, Skye,
April 1929.

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IN THE LAND OF CUCHULAINN

AN October morning in the woods at Ostaig, beside the Sound of Sleat.

Upon the old ash trees the rooks are clamouring beside their nests as they do in early spring.

Rime lies on the grass; in shady nooks a powdering of snow rests. Upon the waters of the Sound of Sleat many widgeon float. They are travellers, and as they drift on the tide they call to one another with high-pitched whistling cries.

Across the Sound the lights of Mallaig had twinkled through the night like the lamps of some fairy city: at sunrise the smoke from many herring drifters, which one after another entered its small harbour, lay on the air.

Sleat is the Land of Cuchulainn, for it is a tradition of Skye that the hero dwelled awhile in the Castle of Dunscaith.[1]

Dunscaith stands upon the western shore of Sleat.

[1] The Gaelic spelling is *Dun Sgàthaich.*

From Ostaig a moorland road crosses the backbone of the peninsula to Dunscaith. It climbs to a height of six hundred feet, and then of a sudden the traveller sees ahead of him the waters of Loch Eiseord and, on the horizon, the Cuillin with jagged peaks that climb to the clouds. From the watershed the road descends to the sea at Tarscavaig, through woods of birch and hazel. Tarscavaig Bay is broad and fair. There is a small church here. It is built at the water's edge, and during the Sabbath service the roar of the surf mingles with the mournful cadences of the Gaelic psalms.

Some two miles beyond Tarscavaig, on a small rocky headland, is Dunscaith Castle. For centuries the castle has been a grass-grown ruin. On three sides it is washed by the sea. On the fourth is a gully, which is crossed by two arched walls enclosing a space for a wooden drawbridge. The arches are still in good preservation. Of the castle itself little but the foundations remain.

Dunscaith was abandoned by the MacDonalds of the Isles shortly after they built the castle of Duntulm (itself now a ruin). It was, we may infer, upon his way from Dunscaith to Duntulm that Donald Gruamach died, in 1534, beside a well that bears his name on Druim nan Cleochd. Donald Gruamach was one of the most celebrated of the MacDonalds. Among pipers his name will always be known because of the beautiful composition in *Ceòl Mór* which bears his name.

In the misty past, before the MacDonalds came to Dunscaith, the castle, tradition tells us, was the home of an amazon queen, by name Sgàthach. We read that the castle was built upon a rock of appalling height. It had

"seven great doors and seven great windows between every two doors of them, and thrice fifty couches between every two windows of them, and thrice fifty handsome marriageable girls in scarlet cloaks and in beautiful and blue attire attending and waiting upon Sgàthach."

Queen Sgàthach was a warrior without equal; she trained many in the art of battle. Cuchulainn, Knight of the Red Branch of Ulster, and admired "for the melody of his language, for the beauty of his face, and the loveliness of his look," crossed from Erin to complete his training in arms under this beautiful and imperious queen.

One of the titles of Cuchulainn is "Chief of the Isle of Mist." Eilean a' Cheò, the Isle of Mist, is the poetical name for Skye, and that title he must have received after his time of instruction at Dunscaith.

Cuchulainn came to Dunscaith in this manner. He had heard of a mighty woman warrior who dwelled in the Land of Shadows and could teach young heroes great feats of arms. Cuchulainn set out for the Island of Shadows. He passed through dark forests and across deserts. His way was barred by the vast Plain of Ill Luck. It was impassable because of its bogs and sticky clay. Cuchulainn was standing here, at a loss what to do, when a youth with a face radiant as the sun approached him. The stranger gave him a wheel, and told him to roll it across that dread plain and follow it with faith. Cuchulainn did so, and the wheel, radiating a beam so fierce that the morass was dried in its path, was his friend, and saw him safely across the Plain of Ill Luck.

Cuchulainn was of royal birth; his mother was Dechtine, sister of King Conchobar. His father's name was Sualtam.

As a boy Cuchulainn was named Setanta. He received his name Cuchulainn in the following curious way. An Irish personage named Culan invited the king and his suite to visit him. The visitors arrived. Culan then asked the king whether his retinue was complete. On being assured that all were present, he let loose his watch-dog and closed his doors. Shortly afterwards Setanta arrived. The watch-dog savagely attacked him, but after a struggle the lad overpowered and killed the fierce hound.

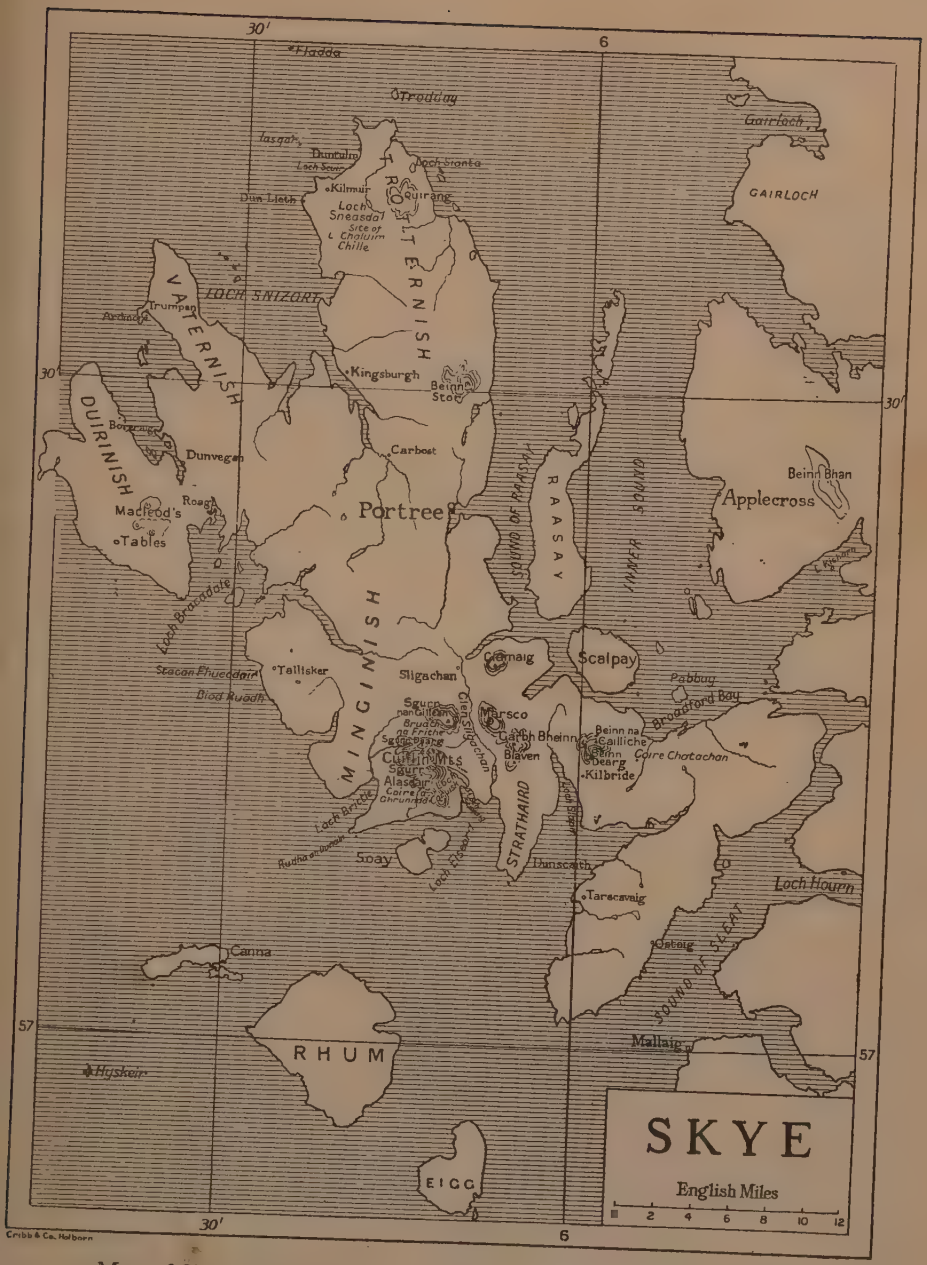
Culan was furious, and Setanta, in order to make amends, offered to guard the house himself until a pup belonging to the unfortunate dog should grow up.

Accordingly Setanta was henceforth called Cu Chulainn, or Culan's dog.

When Cuchulainn arrived before the castle of Dunscaith he was told that his first test would be the crossing of the Bridge of Cliffs.

"Wonderful was the sight that bridge afforded when anyone would leap upon it, for it narrowed until it became as narrow as the hair of one's head, and the second time it shortened until it became as short as an inch, and the third time it grew slippery as an eel of the river, and the fourth time it rose up on high against you until it was as tall as the mast of a ship."

As Cuchulainn essayed the crossing of this perilous bridge, the beautiful daughter of Queen Sgàthach lost her heart to him. As she watched the hero from one of the windows of the *grianan*, or sunny bower, "her face and colour constantly changed, so that now she would be as white as a little white floweret, and again she would become scarlet."



Map of Skye, of which one of the poetical names is Eilean a' Cheò.

During the stay of Cuchulainn at Dunscaith, the warrior queen fought her rival Princess Aoife. When the two hosts met, Aoife challenged Sgàthach to single combat. Cuchulainn went in the queen's place and, after a desperate fight, carried Aoife back to the camp of Sgàthach as a prisoner. Then Aoife and Cuchulainn became lovers, and Aoife, after he had returned to Erin, bore Cuchulainn a son named Conlaoch.

His son, unknown to him, grew to manhood. On the field of battle in Ulster the two met. The son, knowing his father, sent his spear shaft foremost. The father, not knowing the son, sent his spear point foremost, so that he killed his boy and suffered long-sustained remorse.

Human life was of little account in the days of Cuchulainn and Sgàthach. We read that on one occasion the queen and her warrior women saw a Norse galley tossed by a fierce storm upon the waters of Loch Eiseord. Near the castle the galley was cast ashore. The amazon warriors surrounded the men as they struggled to land. They made them prisoners, and tied each unhappy Viking by his long hair to the branches of an oak so that he swayed in the wind until life had left him.

Beside Dunscaith lies a great boulder known as Clach Luath. Luath (Swift) was the name of Cuchulainn's dog, and to this rock the hero was accustomed to tie his hound on returning to the castle from hunting. On these expeditions he was doubtless at times accompanied by the three sons of Uisneach, who were also pupils of Queen Sgàthach at her castle.

There are two things in Skye at the present day to keep alive the memory of Cuchulainn. One of them is the stone

where his dog was tied; the other is the Skye proverb, "Cho laidir ri Cuchulainn" (As powerful as Cuchulainn). But the Cuillin hills are not, as many have thought, named after him. . . .

An October gale sweeps across from the Cuillin as I write. Past Dunscaith it rushes. The broken waves race in eagerly. The ocean is a smother of foam. The music of the breaking seas and the cry of the gale are in harmony beside the old ruin that was fashioned, so 'tis said, by innumerable fairy hands in the course of a single night. South of Dunscaith are rocks which rise sheer from the sea. There is a deep continuous roar here this autumn day from the waves that beat ceaselessly against the cliffs. On the uprushing current of strong wind the creamy foam is lifted and, like giant snowflakes, is borne high into the air and far inland over the brown moors. Across the sea shadows of wind-urged clouds race. In sunlight the white crests of the waves sparkle and quiver; as the clouds overshadow them the whiteness of the spray is changed instantly to pale grey and the waters no longer smile. On a narrow ledge of the cliff an assembly of dark-plumaged shags stand, heads to wind. From time to time one of their number flies out from its chilly perch and with difficulty soars backwards and forwards across the face of the rock. The force of the gale lessens and the birds, one after another, leave the cliff face, fly seaward a little way, then settle upon the turbulent waters.

Where a burn falls to the sea the rock is low. Here the waves roar with the sound of continuous thunder. A peregrine falcon glides gracefully past, skimming the breaking waves, and the falcon has scarcely disappeared

when an agitated covey of grouse appear above the edge of the cliff and beat out to sea against the gale.

Beyond the racing waves the Cuillin rise. On their heights gleams of sunshine alternate with whirling showers of snow. To the south the weather is finer, and from a heaving waste of silvered waters Rhum of the big hills rises sharply, with Eigg close beside it. Through the Sound of Cuillin the waves march in upon the coast of Dunscaith: they had their birth somewhere beside South Uist, which stands, with the haze of distance upon its hills, on the far western horizon.

Toward sunset the storms thicken on the Cuillin. Jagged streaks of falling snow are lit up by the sun as they pass. On the fringe of one storm the clouds resemble the feathers of a sea-gull's breast; they call to mind grey, downy plumage, soft and delicate.

Sunset warms these aerial snows with a rose-coloured flame, and after sunset they float in grey shafts earthward, as do the fairy lances of Midir in the Green Isle of the Immortals.

Dunscaith, in its last old age, greets the approaching night as a friend and, lulled by the grey wind, sinks into the quiet dreams of sleep.

Ruins of Dunscaith Castle

BEINN NA CAILLICHE

OVERLOOKING Broadford, and rising steeply from the blue waters of the sea, is the shapely hill that is known as Beinn na Cailliche. The cairn of stones which marks its summit is so huge that it is conspicuous even at a distance. A Princess of Norway, so it is said, is buried here: she may have been the same proud ruler who dwelt in Caisteal Maol, at Kyleakin, and, by means of a chain stretched across the Sound, levied toll upon all ships that passed by.

When the Princess lay grievously ill, and knew in her heart that few earthly hours remained to her, she asked that when she died her body might be carried up to the very summit of Beinn na Cailliche, and might be buried full in the track of the Black Wind that sweeps, pure, cold, and vital, across from the shores of Lochlin, hundreds of leagues beneath the pale northern horizon.

She passed, and, with sadness in their hearts, her people carried her up the steep stony slopes of Beinn na Cailliche, perhaps beneath the strong rays of a midsummer sun,

perhaps on a day when the winter wind surged in upon them with stinging hail on its breath and a wild army of ragged mists. On the hill-top they buried the Princess, and with her, so 'tis said, a casket of gold, and they raised over her the great cairn of granite stones which still marks the site where her earthly remains rest, just 2400 feet above the sea that sparkles below.

Her burying-place is a lonely one. In summer a few sheep pasture thus high, and the ptarmigan's white wing at times casts a shadow on her cairn where the delicate parsley fern grows. Upon the cairn the golden eagle perches on calm days of sunshine, and on silent, swift feet the hill fox passes, and perhaps curls in slumber at the back of the wind behind the grey heap of stones that was piled here by strong, rough hands on a day that has long since gone.

Few bird voices are heard upon the hills of Skye, and Beinn na Cailliche was a silent place when, one sunlit midsummer evening, a companion and I climbed it.

The north wind had cleared away the haze, and hill and sea were brilliant. Southward, Ben More of Mull and its attendant peaks seemed close at hand. Upon Ben Nevis, rising far to the east, the snows glistened—for upon it alone among all the hills the winter mantle of white remained. From brilliant white the light of the sun paled through orange to deep rose colour as we climbed, and each minute Beinn na Cailliche cast a more tremendous shadow over hill, glen, and sea to the east.

The sudden view of the Cuillin from the crest of Beinn na Cailliche is always a striking one, but to-night, as we looked across to the Black Cuillin a few minutes before

sunset, there was such beauty upon this great range that the hills might well have been part of a fairy country. Gars Bheinn, Sgurr Alasdair, Sgurr Dearg, Sgurr na Banachdich, Bruach na Frìthe, Sgurr nan Gillean—all were in dark shadow and clear cut against the bright sky beyond. Apart from its fellows, Blaven of the steep rock walls rose darkly, and nearer to us were lesser heights—Marsco, Beinn Dearg, and Glamaig.

The north-western sky was full of colour. In calm beauty the Outer Isles lay. In the sinking sun Harris and Benbecula glowed: a sea of mist that filled the Minch was so ethereal that it was impossible to define its boundary. From the mist-sea the hills of the Outer Hebrides rose. The rocky coast of Lewis was suspended in air. On the north wind the vanguard of the mists drifted down; they commenced to gather about the entrance to the Sound of Raasay. A cold, grey haze quite distinct from themselves marked their track. Along this hazy pathway hurried small, rounded clouds, resembling puffs of smoke. They seemed eager, full of energy, as though charged with a mission by their mother, the great mist cloud, that hung, motionless, above the Sea of the Hebrides. About the slopes of Sgurr a' Choinnich, above Kyleakin, they gathered. They joined hands, and threw a grey girdle about that hill, but did not approach the summit. As the sun neared the north-west horizon, the hills of MacLeod's country took on the deep bloom that is seen upon a ripe grape. By now the shadow of Beinn na Cailliche was so immense that it had crossed the Sound of Sleat and was shading the hills of the mainland beyond.

Southward the grey hand of evening was closing in upon

Ardnamurchan and Mull, upon Eigg, Rhum, and Canna. The north wind was chill, and on the upper slopes of Beinn na Cailliche we found little shelter from it. Upon Loch Cille Chriosd, in Strath Suardal, immediately beneath us, the breath of the breeze could be seen to stir the waters, and dark flurries hurried southward in unending succession across the loch. Upon Loch Slapin, too, were small dark waves, but between that sea-loch and Rhum was a belt of calm weather.

Upon the Cuillin of Rhum a solitary small white cloud rested, bird-like. Most fleet of all the cloudlets, it alone had sailed thus far from the mist ocean northward that had given it birth.

Pulsating and quivering, the sun sank ever lower, and in the path of its orb the western country about Loch Bracadale glowed in an aerial bath of amethyst, of a wonderful beauty that could be painted by no artist's brush or writer's pen. At last, at 10.15, the sun was gone, and the clouds alone were in its rays.

An hour after sunset the western horizon was aglow. Against a radiant background bars of cloud floated. They were incredibly attenuated, of a deep crimson colour, and were apparently motionless.

The sea of mist over the Minch was ever giving birth to infant clouds that glided southward on the breeze. Over Pabbay they hung, and about the rugged slopes of Scalpay they swirled and boiled. At times they reached Glamaig and clung closely to it, but Beinn na Cailliche they passed by, and all through the short summer night we were in clear weather, looking across a wide country that varied each second and showed continually fresh beauties.

As dusk rested upon the hill-top the beacons of the ocean one by one appeared, and the lamps of the stars were lit in the silences of limitless space. How inspiring it was to lie beside the cairn of Beinn na Cailliche, and see, of a sudden, the three flashes of light from Hyskeir, which lies beyond Canna. As the dusk deepened, it seemed as though a planet shone at intervals on the far western horizon across the shoulder of Gars Bheinn. This, however, was no planet, but the powerful far-distant light upon Barra Head sending out its message to ships at sea. Then appeared lesser lights—the beacon upon Eigg, the great lamp at the Kyleakin narrows, the row of twinkling lights that guard Mallaig.

Northward the strong afterglow for long hid the light-houses because of its own brilliance, but at length came six short stabs of light, sending seaward the message of Rudha Reidh, the guardian of all vessels that sail the Minch. Last of all showed the slow-revolving lamp of Rona and, floating in air, the light from Tiumpan Head in the Lewes.

It was near midnight when pale light showed behind Beinn Sgriol, on the south-eastern horizon, and a few seconds later the red rim of the moon, near the full, climbed rather wearily into view. Like some enormous beacon it shone. At last it had cleared the hill, and now set out on its course through the silent sky. For long it was unable to reach the clouds that floated on Pabbay far beneath us, but when its rays did indeed touch them they glowed palely, yet seemed asleep, or beneath some spell.

All through the night we witnessed the aerial course of the wide-wandering moon; all night, as she passed slowly southward, she threw a glistening pathway across the

Sound of Sleat. Before the rising sun had dimmed her lamp, her silver trail on the salt waters had receded beyond Mallaig, and was shining upon Loch nan Uamh, that still breathes the spirit of the ill-starred rising of '45. At dawn, in the moon's pale light, the white sands of Morar showed, grey and ghostly, beside a dark ocean and a still darker shore.

Upon the moors beneath us were many lochs, and as she passed them the moon shone her rays upon each in turn, so that their waters burned with white fire. Other mysterious lights were seen a little distance behind the path of the moon. These were transient, but not too fleeting to watch and record.

Above the Sound of Sleat a long line of mist formed, and upon this the climbing moon shone. Here and there, beside Armadale, were pools of mist that curled and eddied as the steam from the *brochan* brewed over some fire of peats.

Slowly the afterglow crept from north-west through north to north-east, and against it the hills of Applecross stood out darkly. It was shortly after one o'clock (by summer time) that the dusk was deepest. Then, with the approaching day, the beacons of the sea—Barra, Hyskeir, Rona, Rudha Reidh, Tiumpan Head—shone less brightly, and a veil was drawn across the moon-flood upon the ocean southward.

At 3.45 a.m. the sea at the edge of the moon's pathway was a deep blue-grey. Each moment now the moon's track became less bright, until at last it remained only in the mind's eye as an inspiring memory. The north wind was falling light. It left first the Sound of Sleat, and the sea there sank at once to sleep; then was gone also from the Sound of Raasay.

At 4.45 the rising of the sun came with dramatic swiftness. The bands of cirrus clouds half an hour before had glowed with crimson, yet the sun lingered in his coming. Then, at last, from behind Beinn Bhan of Applecross, rose suddenly a single narrow ray of fire. For an instant it glowed, then was gone. And now (so swiftly that we watched it all unprepared) appeared the sun's rim, flashing out fire upon a world that lay spellbound, and awakening the earth to life and activity.

It was exactly five minutes from the first appearance of the sun until the full orb had topped Beinn Bhan. The sea was opal, of such a wonderful and delicate tone as I have never before seen.

In the orange pathway of the rising sun upon Loch Kishorn the inverted shadow of the cone of Beinn Bhan showed dark and clear-cut. A minute or two it remained thus, then all at once vanished.

We looked back upon the Cuillin. Peak after peak in turn caught the rosy glow of this incomparable sunrise. The awakening of the Cuillin was swift.

Through the night our shadows had shown faint in the moonlight. Now the sun in turn began to cast a shadow, and we greeted eagerly its strengthening rays, for we were chilled by the north wind of the night hours. Across the low ground that leads from Broadford to Sleat an unending army of clouds were drifting in from the sea. Over the land they joined, forming four bars which almost touched one another, yet remained separate and distinct. For long these clouds resisted the sun, then gradually dissolved. Many of the glens to the north, too, were filled with low fleecy clouds. Strath Mor, immediately beneath

us, was a sea of mist. Scalpay was cloud-enveloped, but the sea beyond it was clear and windless, and here a steamship could be seen steering south. No single cloud greeted the day upon Beinn na Cailliche, and the silence of dawn was broken only when the crowing of a cock in the village of Broadford, far below, was borne up to us on the still air.

By seven o'clock the sun was drawing the scent from the wild thyme which covered the upper slopes of the hill, the dew was leaving the grass, and that inspiring night was a memory only.

So clear was the air that the ruins of Coire Chatachan, in the glen over two thousand feet below, seemed but a stone's throw away. Here Dr Samuel Johnson and his friend Boswell spent some time during their Hebridean tour; here Boswell with his host brewed and quaffed five gigantic bowls of punch. And so Coire Chatachan is, and I suppose always will be, famous.

At noontide that day when we passed north through Skye, wild rose and *seilisdeir* mingled their blooms beside the road. Each hill was green; each corrie was in radiant sun-flood. Eilean a' Cheò, Isle of Mist, had for once cast off her sadness, and serene joy radiated from her. It was delightful to see her thus, and to know that her smile was even more beautiful than the sadness that is hers when the dun Atlantic wind sweeps across hill, glen, and corrie and the sun is but a memory, though indeed even on the darkest day he is shining beyond the clouds.

BLAVEN

IN the parish of Strath, in the south-west of Skye, a magnificent hill rises straight from the sea. Its name is Blaven,[1] and in grandeur it is not surpassed by the grim peaks of the Cuillin which cluster near it.

In height Blaven is just over three thousand feet. Even at midsummer the June snows may crowd thickly upon its dark ledges for days at a time, and in winter the drift is whirled by the north wind high above its gloomy summit.

The majesty of Blaven is accentuated by its aloofness.

The Black Cuillin are a wild range of serrated peaks, rising in a compact company: Blaven stands alone. Its neighbour, Garbh Bheinn, is little more than an outlying spur, and forms with the mother hill a wild and splintered ridge, ending in Bealach na Beiste, the Pass of the Monster,

[1] It is believed the name Blaven is derived from the Norse *Bla Fjell*, Blue Mount.

where MacKinnon of Strath long ago grappled with and slew a fearsome beast.

Blaven is the home of fierce gales and wind-torn clouds that veil its summit. In wild weather lashing rain sweeps across its smooth rocks. Of an October afternoon, when the wind veers toward the north, Blaven rises mysterious across Loch Eiseord as squalls of furiously driven snow, one after the other, whiten its flanks. But October storms are short-lived, and next morning the air is still and the sky at the zenith of a deep, intense blue. Blaven in strong sunlight sparkles, white and inviting.

One climbs, perhaps, by way of Allt Dunach, the Burn of Sorrow. The burn takes its name from an old shieling, Airigh na Dunaiche. Here, so tradition tells, seven girls and a boy were living. One night all the girls were away at a wedding, and, as the boy lay in bed, seven large cats came in. The animals talked together as they sat beside the fire, and after a time began to spoil the butter and milk in the shieling. When the girls returned the boy told them about the cats, and the next night the cats returned, this time in the forms of seven women, and killed the unfortunate maidens. And so the dwelling was called the Shieling of Sorrow or Disaster.

On an October day the sun is warm and the air is keen on Blaven. So tame are the grouse that one can approach them closely. Backwards and forwards across the brow of Blaven a golden eagle sails; from time to time the roaring of a distant stag is faintly heard.

High on Blaven is a remote corrie where a dark hill loch is cradled. The corrie is Coire an Uaigneis, the Corrie of Secrecy, and its loch is named after it. Sometimes the

The Cuillin, from Beinn Dearg

white wings of a wandering ptarmigan show like drifting snowflakes above the floor of the corrie, and a passing eagle casts his shadow upon it, but it is a lonely country, for the deer rarely climb thus high, and so the hill fox, and perhaps a venturesome sheep wandering far afield in search of sweet grass, have the land to themselves.

From the Corrie of Secrecy to the south ridge of Blaven the climb is short and steep, across sharp stones among which the parsley fern grows freely. As one gains the ridge the view suddenly opens out to the east and south. In October there is snow underfoot here, and a wee lochan among the stones is half hidden beneath snow and ice. Far below lies the Loch of the Corrie of Secrecy, its waters mirroring the quiet sky. Upon the sands of Camusiunary the Atlantic swell breaks lazily. Beyond these lonely sands is a burnished pathway leading to ocean solitudes, for the waters in the track of the sun quiver in a molten stream.

In the middle distance Rhum lies on the ocean, blue and clear. Beyond it is Coll—the isle on which one of the last of the old pipers had his home not so many years ago—and beyond Coll stand the hills of Tiree. Between Tiree and Mull rise the shapely Treshnish Isles.

From the south ridge to the summit of Blaven the ascent is steep. The ground is rocky; there is little vegetation save a few plants of the starry saxifrage growing where water trickles over the stones.

As one reaches the hill-top a grey hail shower is hiding Loch Slapin, and on the summit hail and powdery snow soon begin to fall. Snow lies thick upon the ground here, and at the edge of the north precipice are drifts. The tracks of a fox cross the hill-top.

The snowfall becomes less dense, and now across the deep glen that was formerly the boundary between the lands of MacKinnon and MacLeod the Black Cuillin show. Beyond Glen Sligachan towers the slender shapely cone of Sgurr nan Gillean. It is dark no longer, but steel blue with the first autumn snows. Beside it rise the Pinnacles, delicately powdered. They remind one of a lonely Spitzbergen peak.

And now up Glen Sligachan a heavy snow shower is hastening, and the air is once more thick with driven snowflakes. They approach the precipice. As they reach it they are carried upwards, and, once beyond the uprising current of air upon the precipice, fall calmly and in ordered ranks upon the narrow hill-top. The shower passes, and as it thins Loch Slapin appears faintly three thousand feet below. At first it is elusively grey, with a tinge of blue in its greyness, but as the shower retreats it becomes deep blue and distinct.

As Sleat, across Loch Eiseord, gradually frees herself of the shower, the ruins of Dunscaith Castle are seen. On the bay of Tarscavaig rides a fishing-boat, dark against the woods of russet birch and hazel that grow beside Gillean.

Below Blaven, near the point of Strathaird, is a celebrated sea cave. It is called the Spar Cave.

There is an interesting account of the Spar Cave in a book which was published in Edinburgh in 1811. The title of the book is *Description of the Spar Cave*, and its author one K. MacLeay, M.D. He writes:

"The cave has received the name of Slochd Altrimen, which in the language of the country signifies the Nursling Cave, or the cavity where the child was preserved.

"An ancient tradition furnishes the tale from which we may suppose the cave has derived its name. At a distant period of Scottish history, Skye and the whole Hebride Isles were under the dominion of the Norwegian princes. Our tradition will have it that, about the middle of the ninth century, MacCairbre, King of Ulster, having assembled a great fleet, set sail for the Hebride Isles. Arriving unexpectedly, he committed barbarous and wanton cruelties, ravaging the Islands for many days. Having loaded his ships with plunder, he departed without opposition, the native princes being absent with their King Anlaive of Norway, engaged in a contest with the Picts. On their return to Ulster a storm arose, which forced the fleet of MacCairbre to seek shelter in the island of Colonsay. The chief of the island, though compelled to subjection by the Norwegian kings, was attached to this prince of Ireland from ties of consanguinity. He received the strangers with kindness and entertained them until the storm abated. Before they departed the chief of Colonsay declared fealty to the King of Ulster, and to prove his attachment sent his only son to Ireland, accompanied by a chosen band, along with MacCairbre to learn the art of war.

"The deadly feuds which long prevailed betwixt the chiefs of the Isles and those of Ireland became even more inveterate by this invasion from Ulster. Determined on revenge, the Lords of Skye, with other powerful allies, assembled their tribes and embarked in an hundred vessels for an attack upon Ulster. With a favouring gale they arrived on the coast of Ireland and, having disembarked in the night, immediately beset the fortress of MacCairbre. A bloody conflict ensued. The King of Ulster and many

of his people were slain. Nor were the men of the Isles more fortunate. Several of their chiefs were laid low, but the troops of Ulster were vanquished and their severities retaliated.

"Having completed their revenge they returned to their barks, carrying with them the King of Ulster's daughter, many of his warriors, and among them the young chief of Colonsay, as proofs of their victory. Propitious winds seemed to favour their course. They soon beheld the towering cliffs of their native mountains, which they were rapidly approaching, and gladness, mingled indeed with sorrow for their friends who had fallen, filled their hearts.

"On the evening of the fourth day a calm prevailed over the face of the ocean. The white sails of the fleet were reflected from its unruffled bosom, as the sun's last beam sunk beneath the western wave. The mournful song of the rowers as they plied the steady oar resounded far over the expanse. The returning fleet was descried from the shores of Skye, and their anxious relatives anticipated a safe arrival. Disappointment, however, awaited their hopes. In the night a dreadful storm succeeded the calm, and with the morning dawn only one sail was to be seen. This bark rode triumphantly over the waves, and seemed to baffle the efforts of the gale. She steered her course for Slappen's hilly shore, but there arose, over a reef of rocks which stretch far off the land, a tremendous sea. Thither the current swept the vessel, and she was quickly overwhelmed in the foaming surge.

"Hope now fled the breast of the fair Dounhuila, who, from the turrets of her father's castle, beheld the horrors of the storm. Her brother had gone with the warriors of

BLAVEN, FROM THE SEA

Skye, and despair laid hold of her heart. Her parents, too, gazed over the scene, and their anguish was severe. Their sorrowful eyes still fixed upon the deep, they saw some object floating towards the shore. Dounhuila fled to the beach. She beheld a young man, almost lifeless, brought to land by a dog; but alas! it was not her brother. It was the young chief of Colonsay, but she knew him not. Pity assumed unwonted softness in her countenance, and the mild lustre of her dark brown eyes declared the tenor of her mind. Collecting her father's vassals, the young chief of Colonsay was conveyed to Dunglas, a fortress whose remains are still visible near the Sparry Cave. Dounhuila's brother returned in safety, as did many of his shipwrecked warriors, and joy filled the halls of Dunglas, but the fair daughter of Ulster was seen no more. . . .

"The lovely Dounhuila with pleasure beheld the returning strength of the youthful stranger. She was his guardian spirit, and mutual attachment grew in their hearts. But when the young warrior made himself known to Dounhuila an unsurmountable barrier seemed to forbid their love. Their parents were determined foes, and the young chieftain, though kindly treated, was in the Lord of Dunglas' power and was strictly guarded. Confined within the castle walls for many months, he remained unknown to all except Dounhuila. With a form of exquisite symmetry, yet with simple manners and an unsuspicious heart, and more the victim of love than the child of prudence, she became pregnant. The horror of the situation daily increased. Concealment appeared impossible. The disgrace which seemed inevitable preyed upon her spirits, and melancholy deeply marked her features. She knew her father's proud heart and

implacable disposition, and that certain death awaited the unhappy pair the moment her situation was known.

"It happened, fortunately, at this time that the Lords of the Hebrides were summoned to Norway to assist their king in repelling an invasion from Saxony. The chief of Dunglas, with his son, assembled their warriors and departed for that country, leaving the charge of the castle and their prisoners to a few vassals of tried fidelity. In their absence Dounhuila prevailed with the soldiers. Her lover was permitted to depart, and he set sail for Colonsay. Dounhuila was delivered of a son, and, being aided by a trusty domestic, the child was conveyed to the Cave on the seashore to prevent discovery. The difficulty of access to this retirement rendered it secure from intrusion; the entrance was guarded by the young chief of Colonsay's faithful dog he had left behind, and here Dounhuila regularly retired to nurse her son. The family feuds of Dunglas and Colonsay in time had ceased. A happy union of the lovers took place, and the child of the cave was permitted to emerge from his dreary nursery; hence the origin of its name."

The Spar Cave of Strathaird is reached from the shore by a steep ascent over wet, slippery rock through inky darkness. Though its history is interesting it is a gloomy place, and on a sunny October day who would exchange the crown of Blaven for its slimy recesses?

Across Sleat one sees Ardnamurchan, and beyond Ardnamurchan, Treshnish Point of Mull. There is sun upon the ocean here, and the Treshnish Isles, almost fifty miles distant, are incredibly clear. Like a small fleet, they appear to sail the seas. In turn rise Carn a' Burg (in olden times a fortress), Fladda, Lunga, golden in sun-flood,

with its curious Dun Cruit or Harp Rock beside it, and lastly, Bac Mór or the Dutchman's Cap, most closely resembling a vessel of them all. It is inspiring to see that distant island group so clearly, but even more noteworthy to view, across those isles, the Ross of Mull and Iona. From Blaven summit the Abbey Church on Iona is seen to rise from the floor of ocean against a golden horizon. It is a full sixty miles distant, and thus can scarcely be discerned with the unaided eye. Through a glass it is unmistakable. Iona, the Sacred Isle, is the burying-place of the kings of many nations. It is a small and lowly isle, and few realise that it can be seen from the hills of Skye.

Evening approaches. The Cuillin become deep blue; the sun has left them now. The first virginal snows of autumn do no more than powder them. They lie, faintly blue, upon those grim summits. The corries are dark as night. Eastward are the mainland peaks. They rise, hill upon hill, covered in snow that is lemon-coloured in the rays of the sinking sun.

North-west and west the Outer Hebrides climb from a deep blue sea. Showers drift across those distant isles, but Shillay, in the Sound of Harris, is in mellow sunshine. Above the upper waters of Loch Hourn the sun shines upon a grey shower and fires its snowflakes with rainbow colours. Between Ostaig of Sleat and Knoydart on the mainland another ghostly shower is suspended. 'Twixt air and sea it weaves mysterious threads. At one moment a wide rainbow is formed east of Blaven, and simultaneously a "mock sun" to the west shows its rainbow colours above the Cuillin.

The sun sets. Frost binds the snow. Loch na

Creitheach, three thousand feet below Blaven, is already in twilight. Eastward the mainland hills assume a delicate tint of pink. Upon Sleat the last of the sunset burns, and there is sun also upon the isles that guard Loch nan Cilltean, beside Arisaig.

Dusk spreads her mantle over Blaven. Low in the sky over Loch Eiseord the young moon shines golden. Near her is Jupiter, and farther to the east is the red light of Mars. Suddenly across the starlit sky the aurora darts. The rays of the Northern Lights appear in groups, each group seeming independent of its fellows. Some of these groups of light take on the form of ice crystals, others resemble ghostly hands that feel their way across the heavens. These ray clusters are near the zenith. Other shafts of light are thrust up from the northern horizon. They wax and wane, tremble like the rays of a searchlight, then all at once disappear.

Although these wonderful ray-clusters seem independent, they form, together, a vast arc of light that crosses the zenith and continues away and away towards Tir nan Og.

Green, pale grey, mauve, and dark red are the colours of these Merry Dancers, and against their cold, unearthly light the outline of Blaven shows as the young moon dips below the horizon and the night sky is filled with the unwonted effulgence of the Nimble Men.

LOCH CORUISK: MOONSET AND SUNRISE

" For rarely human eye has known
A scene so stern as that dread lake
With its dark ledge of barren stone."—Scott.

LOCH CORUISK (Loch of the Corrie of Waters) is renowned as a loch of unusual beauty, not only in Scotland but throughout the world. It is a long loch, lying in the heart of the Black Cuillin, in a magnificent setting. Sir Walter Scott immortalised it in "The Lord of the Isles," and on a rock near the loch chiselled out his initials. Many writers have praised the beauty of Loch Coruisk, many artists have painted it, but few have seen it beneath the midnight sky. In the silent, windless watches of the night Loch Coruisk casts a spell that is graven deep in the memory, for by moonlight it has more affinity with the world of dreams and visions than even the ocean at sunset or the Isles lying asleep beneath the pale fingers of Aurora.

By sea the approach to Loch Coruisk is easy. Loch

Scavaig [1] (the Dark or Shadowy Loch) gives good anchorage, and from the shore of Loch Scavaig to Loch Coruisk is a distance of only a few hundred yards.

But by land Coruisk is not so accessible. One must traverse (on foot or on a hill pony) the weary miles of Glen Sligachan or, if one approaches from Glen Brittle, cross the heart of the Black Cuillin.

The passes of the Cuillin are arduous—almost as testing as the peaks themselves—and in the crossing from Glen Brittle to Loch Coruisk the climber must make his way up the steep and rocky Coire a' Ghrunnda, cross its *bealach* or pass, and descend to the silent shore of Loch Coruisk by the desperately rough Garbh Choire.

On a warm, windless day of May I crossed the Cuillin from Glen Brittle to Loch Coruisk. The sky was overcast. The peaks were dark, clear, and full of silence.

On the hills of the Scottish mainland in May one hears the love song of the curlew, the mournful pipe of the *feadag* or golden plover, and, on the last wind-swept slopes, the croaking of the white-winged ptarmigan. But May in the Cuillin of Skye is a time of intense silence. There is scarcely a ptarmigan on all the range; no curlew sings here. Save for the delicate young growth of the alpine plants and the increasing warmth of the sun there is nothing to show that spring is come.

Of all the high corries of the Cuillin, Coire a' Ghrunnda is the most sunny. It leans toward the south-west, and the spring sunshine lingers here late in the day. Immense slabs of rock, smooth-worn by the glaciers of a past age, form a vast sun trap. In niches of the rock small shrubs

[1] The Gaelic spelling of the loch is *Sgàthabhaig*.

of juniper grow, and in May the rose root puts forth pale rose-coloured buds.

A blue hare and a few meadow pipits were all the life I saw in Coire a' Ghrunnda this May day, but, unexpectedly, at a height of 1700 feet above sea-level, I passed the nest of a wren. Domed, compactly built, and newly finished, it was placed in a cranny of a great boulder, and I wondered what had induced its owners to set their house thus high.

Like an oasis in the desert, Loch Coire a' Ghrunnda refreshes the eye of the climber after his toil up the steep rocks and "scree" of the lower part of the corrie. It is a delightful loch of clear waters, lying in a rocky cradle 2400 feet above the ocean that is seen far beneath. From the loch a steep ascent over boulders brings the climber to the *bealach*, or hill pass. Near the loch, on damp gravel beds, crimson buds clustered on the alpine sea thrift this May day, and on drier ground the purple mountain saxifrage—first of all plants of the high hills to blossom—was showing its delightful flowers. The nectar from these lowly blossoms had attracted wandering bumble-bees. Perhaps these bees lived in the corrie; perhaps the warmth of a fine May afternoon had tempted them to fly up from the low ground.

It was evening when I stood on the pass at the head of Coire a' Ghrunnda. Forty miles westward the cloud canopy ended, and Barra showed in orange light. The lighting was so unusual that Maol Domhnaich, a rocky island some miles to the east of Barra and usually indistinguishable from it at a distance, was startlingly clear. It rose from the sea, entirely altering the appearance of the

Isle of Saint Barr, so that I looked upon it at first doubting whence it had come.

Loch Coruisk, 2700 feet beneath me, was already in twilight, and the Garbh Choire a place of gloom. Upon the cone of Blaven, across Loch Scavaig, was a luminous veil of transparent blue, until the rays of the setting sun, blood-red, crept over it like some spiritual fire. Here and there, high in the heavens, faint showers hung.

The walk down the Garbh Choire seemed unending. No longer was there the sight of Barra in sunset glow to cheer. Everywhere were enormous boulders, piled in confusion. Well was the Garbh Choire named of old. It is indeed the Rough Corrie, and to descend it is a toil and a weariness; there is little thought for the ever-changing view southward.

But at length I had passed beyond the scene of desolation and lifelessness, and was walking towards Loch Coruisk, over heather and sea thrift, beside a small burn of clear water.

A herd of deer crossed beneath me; on the horizon a stag was seen standing, sharply defined, against the last of the sunset. Beside Loch Coruisk my friend and I made our evening meal. The loch was calm and dark, and as the twilight deepened it became each moment more mysterious.

From Coruisk the Cuillin are magnificent, but never more so than in the last of the sunset that precedes the night. For a time the turrets of Bidein stood out against the afterglow; when that light had gone the hills were faint and intangible until the coming of the moon. The air was warm. There was no dew. Our camp fire flickered, glowed, became dim, in turn. Blue aromatic smoke from

dried rowan wood rose like incense into the night air. A gull drifted ghost-like across Loch Coruisk. Above us towered Sgurr nan Eag, steel-grey with dripping flanks from the melting snows.

At ten o'clock the sky cleared. A star shone out. Little flurries of wind crossed Loch Coruisk. Dileas, our faithful collie dog, slept. Upon a faint north-west breeze thin mackerel clouds drifted past, high overhead. But with us no wind stirred.

Southward the sky commenced to glow. We knew that where we rested the rising moon would be hidden from us. We therefore walked south beside the sleeping loch until we had reached the Atlantic at Loch Scavaig. There, in deep heather, we lay awhile, with the murmur of the river in our ears, and the peace and stillness of the night all about us.

Orange, full-orbed, and majestic, the moon climbed above the sea. Bars of cloud floated in her course, but soon she had mounted above them and shone serenely upon a silent, sleeping world of unusual beauty.

On the horizon lay the distant Isle of Eigg, pale and etherealised. It was there that Saint Donnan (Donnan of cold Eigg) was martyred by the island Picts in 617, together with his fifty-two companions. There were pools of golden light where the moon shone upon the transient ripples of Loch Scavaig. Much dark water separated these pools, for the moon showed her reflected light only where the loch was rippled, and for the most part it was glassy.

There was no swell on the shore. The tide was low, and from time to time, on a faint cold air, was drifted the tang of seaweed, healthful and vital.

Slowly the moon climbed, and now the great snowfield upon Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh glowed faintly with reflected light. Gars Bheinn, rising almost sheer from Loch Scavaig, towered gigantically into the night. The heather was warm and dry. One slept for a few minutes, and awaking saw that the moon had moved perceptibly. Before the dawn first showed pale in the eastern sky the light of the moon was dimmed by thin clouds floating at a great height, and the margins of the clouds were gilded by her rays.

The air became colder. The light strengthened. The gulls upon a grassy isle of Loch Coruisk bestirred themselves. They rose on white wings, drifted out over the loch, alighted on the water and bathed. I admired them for that early morning icy bath.

For long the sunrise tarried. The heavens again were cloud-free. The sky, clear and blue, was permeated with the freshness of dawn. At last a pale rose flush burned upon the black rock walls of Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh, and we knew that the sun fire had touched the high tops of the Cuillin. Imperceptibly though surely the power of the sunflood increased. In the high corries the snow began to sparkle; the snowfields glistened like diamonds in their dark setting.

In the corrie at the head of Loch Coruisk a thin haze hung. The previous night also it had been there. It appeared as though faint blue smoke, inconceivably delicate, permeated the atmosphere. Can it have been the magic mist in which the nymph of Loch Coruisk conceals herself —that nymph "who comes there only when she knows that someone is present who will love her"? Beside the loch, in the silence of the night, she sings and weaves beautifully, but never a word must one say to her.

THE CUILLIN, FROM ELGOL

It was long ere the sun shone in the deep corrie of Loch Coruisk. Indeed, each moment the air became colder, and the breath of the frost was near. The sea-gulls clamoured above their isle. They swooped upon a merganser duck who was passing by at her fishing, and compelled her to dive hurriedly with much splashing. Above the black deeps a pair of courting sandpipers circled.

Now it could be seen that small trees grew on the farther shore of the loch. They were birches and rowans. The delightful green of their young foliage contrasted strongly with the dark brown of the heather and the black, merciless, rock walls above them.

At last the sun reached us, and full morning was come to the Loch of the Corrie of Waters.

Miles of arduous climbing and rough walking lay between us and our base in Glen Brittle. The sun was warm as we retraced our steps up the rock-strewn and painfully steep Garbh Choire, but a north wind was piling billowy clouds upon Garbh Bheinn, and the air was keen. Far up the Garbh Choire we passed a single hind. She was in a wild and rocky part of the corrie, and could go no farther from us because her means of escape was shut off by a precipice that rose above her. When she saw us she crept behind a rock and lay down out of our sight.

A golden eagle sailed magnificently above the ridge of Sgurr Dubh above us. In hot pursuit of him flew a raven, making angry dives at the eagle, who was indifferent to his smaller adversary and disappeared from view beyond the hill-top. A few minutes later the raven's furious croaking could be heard. Perhaps the eagle had perched upon some rock and the raven was mobbing him there.

It was after midday when the narrow *bealach* between the Garbh Choire and Coire a' Ghrunnda was reached. On the instant a glorious view south-west and south opened out. The sunshine was brilliant, the sky almost cloudless. The Black Wind from the north was rushing south across the Atlantic. Already upon the island of Soay white waves were breaking, but between Soay and Rhum was a plain of calm water.

At last the north wind breathed also upon these waters so that they were troubled. Eastward a long line of dense white clouds were drifting south, low above the Sound of Sleat. Four hundred feet below us the blue waters of Loch Coire a' Ghrunnda sparkled. Thousands of insects had hatched from the loch. Above sheltered slopes they danced in the air; on the wind they were herded protestingly in clouds.

The wind increased. In the shelter of a rock we boiled our tea on a fire of white juniper wood. On Loch Coire a' Ghrunnda were white-crested waves; across the loch the wind swept in eager gusts. That night, before sunset, the north wind down in Glen Brittle bore winter on its breath. It scattered the cherry blossom like snow, and silenced the liquid notes of the cuckoo and the song of the merle.

Thus winter followed close upon the heels of summer on the spires and glens of the Black Cuillin.

SOAY

WHEN the Norsemen, a thousand years ago, added the Hebrides to their crown and named them Südreyar, or South Isles, many of the islands received Norse names.

Such a name is Soay, in English the Isle of Sheep.

At least three islands of this name lie off the western coast of Scotland. One is beside Iona, the second is far out in the Atlantic and forms one of the St Kilda group, the third is off Skye, and lies in the shadow of the Black Cuillin.

One winter afternoon, as I stood upon the narrow summit of Gars Bheinn, most southerly of the Cuillin, in deep snow, where the roosting hollows of a covey of ptarmigan showed grey beside me, I saw a small heather fire lighted on the shore of Skye, opposite Soay. It was a signal for a boat, and the smoke had coiled into the still air but a few minutes when a boat passed out from Soay

and crossed the strait for that lonely unseen traveller. But although I had often looked upon Soay from the Cuillin I was long in setting foot upon the isle.

My opportunity came one day of May.

The previous evening I had rested upon the top of Sgurr nan Eag, three thousand feet above the Atlantic. The air was warm. There was no wind. South and west lay the ocean, pale grey and hazy in soft primrose light. Above the hill-top a butterfly fluttered. A bumble-bee, flying fast across the hill, steered unerringly for Loch Coruisk, three thousand feet below. Immediately beneath me—so close that it seemed as though a stone might be thrown upon it—the island of Soay lay. On its heathery crown lochs of various sizes reflected the blue of the sky above them. In a crescent on the shore of the eastern bay of the island stood the small village, its buildings from this great height seeming like dolls' houses. Beside the houses were the small cultivated patches, green with young grass. On the bay a number of small boats were moored, and the steamship *Hebrides*, even as I watched, left the isle and steered west through sunlit waters.

The following day came my opportunity of visiting Soay. A boat had crossed to Skye for the doctor, and the owner of the boat—a seaman and piper—kindly gave me a passage to the island with him.

The sun shone brilliantly upon the blue Atlantic and the sands of Loch Brittle as the engine was cranked up, the anchor weighed, and we sailed out through sparkling waters.

Arriving at Soay from the north, one enters a fine natural harbour that is sheltered from every wind, but which it is not possible to use at low tide because of a shallow bar

across its mouth. The shores of the harbour are delightful, especially at the season of spring. Feathery birches grow to the tide, and beneath the birches is a carpet of wild hyacinths, primroses, and violets.

It is a full half-mile from the landing-place to the village. The track is rough and narrow, and is slippery with stones. The people of Soay have petitioned the authorities for a road—so far without success.

At one time Soay was uninhabited. The first people to live here were, it is believed, shepherds in the employment of the MacAskall of Rudha an Dunain. These shepherds were sent to Soay in the sixteenth century.

There is a tradition that the first two shepherds on Soay allowed their peat fire to die out. They had no means of rekindling it, nor had they a boat. They thereupon boldly swam the Sound of Soay to the nearest point of Skye—a distance of fully a mile—and then walked across to Rudha an Dunain for tinder for their fire. But the shepherds must have left Soay before the time of the compiling of the *Old Statistical Account* (1795), for here it is mentioned that Soay is uninhabited.

At the present day there is grazing on Soay for several hundred sheep. There are no horses on the island, and so the land cannot be ploughed in the usual way. Soay is one of the few places in the west where the old-fashioned *cas chrom* (a plough-shaped spade, worked by hand) is still in use. It is an unwieldy implement in the hands of an amateur, but those skilled in its handling make light of it, and they will tell you that it delves deeper than the plough, and gives better crops.

On the island of Soay there is no telegraph. When the

doctor is needed a motor-boat must cross to Glen Brittle, six miles distant. Thence a man must walk nine miles to the telegraph office at Carbost to summon the doctor who lives at Struan. A telegraph or a telephone would be of inestimable value to the people of Soay.

Should a man of Soay cross to Skye and wish, a few days later, to return to his native isle, he must light a fire, and by means of a thick smoke cloud seek to attract the attention of his people.

Soay receives most of its mails from Mallaig, twenty miles distant, by sea. Each Tuesday morning early a motor-boat leaves Soay for Mallaig, returning the same night with mails from the mainland.

It may be of interest to describe the approach to Soay, across Skye, by what may be termed the overland route. The traveller crosses the lower slopes of the Cuillin from Glen Brittle, and when he arrives at that part of the Skye coast which is nearest to Soay he lights a fire, taking care that there shall be as much smoke and as little flame as possible. When the smoke is observed from the village on Soay (the village is perhaps two miles distant from where the fire is lighted) an answering fire is sometimes kindled to show that the signal has been seen, and then the traveller rests upon the heather until he sees a boat leave the island for him.

Until recent years each family on Soay had their own knoll for the kindling of fires, so that those upon the island at once knew who was waiting for the "ferry." But now the old distinctions have gone, and, since the various knolls have no longer any special significance, a fire is lighted wherever there is suitable heather for burning.

At work on Soay with the Cas Chrom, a primitive hand-plough

Twice my friend and I crossed the three miles of boggy moorland that lie between Glen Brittle and Soay in an attempt to reach the island. On the first occasion our fire was not a success. There had been heavy rain the previous day and the heather was wet and sodden. At the end of an hour and a half, since there was no answer to our feeble smoke, we returned to Glen Brittle in a gathering storm.

On our way we passed close to a cave in a rock called Sgumban. The cave is named Priosan Charn nan Cuillin, and the following is its history, received from one who is an authority on the folk-lore of Skye :—

Iain Dubh MacAskall, of Rudha an Dunain, had in his employment a beautiful dairymaid named Ciarag. Finding that she was about to bear him a child, his thoughts turned on getting her a husband.

He decided that his manager or grieve—a man of fine appearance—was most worthy of her hand in marriage. One day Iain Dubh and his grieve were walking across to Camusiunary. MacAskall told his man that he must marry Ciarag. The grieve, however, had other views, and even at the risk of angering his autocratic master refused to agree to his plan. At the time of the argument that ensued the two were passing near the cave in Sgumban, and in his anger Iain Dubh (the MacAskalls were men of great strength) flung the unfortunate man into the cavern. But before leaving the grieve he called down to him, "Am pos thu Chiarag?" ("Will you marry Ciarag?"). From his dark prison the man called back, "Cha phos am bliadhna" ("I will not marry this year"). Iain Dubh left him there. Three days later he returned that way from Camusiunary.

A winter blizzard was raging, and great snow-drifts had formed so that walking was slow. Iain Dubh, against wind and snow, fought his way to Sgumban, and on reaching the entrance to the black hole in the rock, shouted down into the darkness, "Am bheil thu beo?" ("Are you living?").

From the depths came a voice, "Tha mi beo, agus gle bheag taing dhuitse air a son" ("I am alive, and little thanks to you for that"). Iain Dubh next called out, "Am pos thu Chiarag anis?" ("Will you marry Ciarag now?"). Immediately came the undaunted answer, "Cha phos gu siorruidh" ("I will *never* marry her"). Iain Dubh, admiring the courage of the man, relented. He succeeded in lifting him out of his prison and carried him on his back down to Rudha an Dunain.

Poor Ciarag was so upset that the grieve would not wed her that she brooded continually until her mind gave way, and she made her home in the cave beside Loch Brittle that is still known as Uamha Chiarag, or Ciarag's Cave.

For a week after our first attempt to reach Soay by land bad weather persisted. Then at last came a lessening of the north wind, and, as we crossed the moor towards the island, Sgurr Alasdair rose clear against a cobalt sky. We found it hard to make a fire. The island missionary had inadvertently set the hill ablaze during dry and frosty weather the previous Christmas, and it was only after a search that we discovered a small area of old heather. When this was fired a dense volume of blue smoke rose into the air. We watched its effect on Soay.

The island lay below us in brilliant sunshine. Through a stalking glass the inhabitants could be seen cutting their

peats, and in a few minutes we saw an answering column of smoke rise from the heathery crown of the isle. Soon after that a boat crossed the Sound of Soay for us. The tide was at the full as we embarked. Low on the western horizon the sun shone. Above us the Cuillin towered immense. We landed upon Soay, and the scent of birches greeted us. Oyster-catchers called shrilly and flew close to the boat. We were hospitably received by the people of the isle. The people of Soay are crofters, and most of them are lobster fishers. They are hard workers.[1] The houses are slated, and lack the primitive appearance of the houses of the Outer Isles.

At sunset I climbed the heathery hill above the village. The sky was clear. Across the Sound the Cuillin towered. Upon Sgurr Alasdair, upon Sgurr Dearg, the shades of night descended. Clear-cut and shapely rose Blaven against the evening sky. Between Blaven and Gars Bheinn rose the lesser hill of Sgurr na Stri, dwarfed by its giant neighbours.

Sgurr na Stri is in English, the Hill of Contention. It was named thus because of old MacLeod and MacKinnon strove for its possession. At last, in 1730, the two chiefs met amicably on Sgurr na Stri and, after a conference, agreed to a new "march" between their lands. It was decided that this new boundary should run northward from the sea at a small bay called Port Sgailen, some four hundred yards from where the river from Loch Coruisk enters Loch Scavaig.

Since it was of importance that the new "march" should be known beyond doubt by the local people, a boy from Soay was taken in a boat across to Port Sgailen. Here, in the rude

[1] See p. 37.

fashion of the times, he was thrashed to within an inch of his life in order that the exact spot should be engraved indelibly upon his memory. Willow charcoal (which is imperishable) was also placed on a knoll beside Port Sgailen to mark the new boundary.

Perhaps Sgurr na Stri dreamed of those far-off days on this peaceful night as the stars one by one appeared behind the hill. West, on the far horizon, the bens of Uist rose. Above the distant island peak of Hecla the new moon shone; beneath it was the orange afterglow. From Hyskeir, beyond Canna, came rhythmic flashes from the lighthouse. The evening sky was faultlessly mirrored in a moorland loch near me. A gentle breeze caressed the sea. A light air swayed the heads of the feathery bog-cotton. Near me a grouse crowed cheerily as he settled down for the night.

Darkness came, and below the waning western glow shone, faint and star-like, the distant light of Uisinish, beside that cave at Corodale where homeless Prince Charles was hid after Culloden, when he wandered across the Isles with the price of £30,000 upon his royal head.

RUDHA AN DUNAIN

EILEAN A' CHEÒ, the Isle of Mist, seemed to lie beneath a spell. The winter's afternoon was windless. The heavens were dark, menacing, the air oppressive. The isle lay in that stillness which so often presages a storm: full of suspense was the air.

Never, surely, was Beinn na Cailliche so wrapped about in mystery. The air was full of intangible forces, curbed yet eager. Night fell swiftly. In the corries of the Cuillin was darkness that could be felt. But no wind moved—not even the faintest air-current drifted in from Atlantic deeps, where shone the distant flares of herring drifters lying at their nets. With the first of the dawn came the tempest. The storm-wrack raced in mad play across the corries of Sgurr Dearg. Lashing rain scoured the hills. The burns ran

tumultuously, leaping with low, thunderous music to the leaden ocean.

All day the tempest raged. At midnight the wind suddenly dropped light, and at the zenith white stars glowed. The storm had gone, and next morning the air was soft and clean beside the low sandy shore of Loch Brittle.

It is, perhaps, in early winter that the sea spell is most powerful. At this season the land has fallen into its winter slumber. Snow covers the uplands. Frost binds the hill lochs. But beside the Atlantic the memory of summer is still fresh, for the sea, the mother of all, has stored within herself the life-giving rays of the summer sun, and radiates warmth and energy.

Loch Brittle in the cold light of a winter dawn was a place of murmurous waves, the aftermath of the storm. High overhead a golden eagle soared almost motionless against the breeze, scanning the hillside below him for rabbits. Buzzards mewed, and the clan of the grey crow made discordant music.

Rudha an Dunain is at the mouth of Loch Brittle, on its southern shore. It is now one of the most solitary of Skye headlands, but in former days it was the stronghold of the MacAskalls. There is a tradition that the family lived here for nine hundred years, and there is a Gaelic saying that "there was a MacAskall in Rudha as long as there was a MacLeod in Dunvegan." The last to hold Rudha was Hugh MacAskall, who died in 1864.

According to one tradition the founder of the MacAskalls, Domhnall Dubh, or Black Donald, was hereditary keeper of the ruined castle of Dunscaith before it was a

stronghold of the MacDonalds. This must have been in days almost as remote as those when the galleys of the Norsemen sailed the Hebrid seas and King Haco's fleet steered in all its pride southward through Kyleakin, which still bears his royal name.

It was from this Black Donald that the MacAskalls received their name Clann Dhomhnaill Duibh (Clan of Black Donald). According to a Skye tradition the well-known pipe tune *Piobaireachd Dhomhnaill Duibh* (Black Donald's March) was composed by a MacCrimmon in honour of the founder of the MacAskalls of Rudha.

Close above the sea the moorland track to Rudha an Dunain leads. It crosses the swift-flowing Allt a' Choire Lagain, then passes above a cave having a floor of fine sand. Here green cormorants sit, and on summer days solans glide past the cave's entrance. In winter the green cormorants are still there, but the solans are ranging distant seas.

The long ocean swell enters Loch Brittle. Now and again of a winter's noon it breaks against some dark rock so that a fern-like column of spray, the plaything of the breeze, rises for an instant, misty and fragile. The low winter sun shines upon the green, curling waves, suffusing them with light at the moment when they lean shoreward to break in white foam.

After a while the track, leaving the sea, crosses the shoulder of a little hill, and then all at once the traveller sees below him the ruins of the home of the MacAskalls. The old house stands in a little hollow. It is a *grianan* or sunny spot, looking to the south, and safe from the blustering north wind. Beside the strongly-built, four-

square walls stand the ruins of the outbuildings, now overgrown with bracken, where blackbirds, thrushes, and wandering redwings shelter in winter. Beside the house is Clach na Diòllaid, the Saddle Stone. Upon this stone MacAskall's lady used to stand when she mounted her pony.

In the old ruined house many generations of MacAskalls were born and nurtured. The men were virile and sure of foot from much walking upon moor and hill, the women were skilled in the spinning of fine wool and the weaving of tartan. Some years ago a climber, scaling a steep rock-face on the opposite shore of Loch Brittle, came upon the initials of two MacAskalls cut in the rock with the date (a year early in the past century) below them. The MacAskalls were good seamen, for they lived in the days when the sea was the road in the isles, and when an islesman's life depended upon his skill in handling a boat in heavy weather. Looking seawards from the MacAskalls' ruin there seems at first glance to be no harbour for a boat anywhere along the coast. There is, it is true, a small loch beside the swift ocean currents where the low winter sun shines upon golden reed-beds swaying in the breeze and sparkles upon the blue water, but one does not associate a fresh-water loch with the mooring of sea-boats.

Loch na h-Airde (for so it is named) has the features of a loch of the Outer Isles rather than of Skye. It lies but a few feet above the sea, and at each spring-tide the Atlantic mingles with its peaty waters. Often its shores are strewn with sea-wrack, and I have seen, lying high above the water's edge, the trunk and roots of a forest tree that had been stranded there by some violent storm. I thought it curious that the old tree, covered with barnacles, should

have ended its ocean wanderings upon the shore of this lonely loch, and remarkable that it should have been guided by the flood-tide up the short and narrow burn that links the loch with the sea.

The MacAskalls made use of this burn. They deepened and smoothed its rocky bed so that at high spring-tide a boat could enter the loch, where there is a secure anchorage in any weather. But at neap-tides the sea does not reach the loch, and so they made two side channels half-way between the sea and the loch, where their boats might be drawn up and secured.

But for many years now there has been no boat upon Loch na h-Airde, and so the wild swans may shelter undisturbed behind its reeds, and the grey geese from out the snowy north may linger here with only the deer and the sheep, and perhaps a friendly seal, to see them.

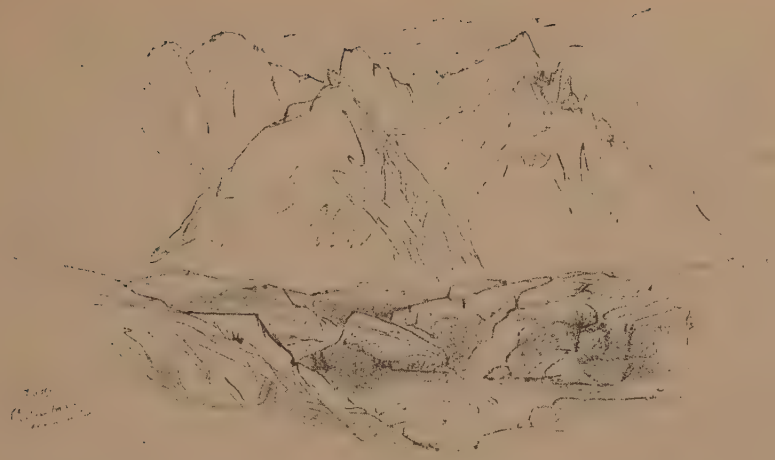
When spring comes the rocks beside Loch na h-Airde are bright with flowers. In a single rock-crack I have seen at the same time wild hyacinth, primrose, tormentil, sea campion, and sea thrift mingling their blossoms, while beside them (but not in flower) were meadow-sweet, honeysuckle, and blackberry.

Above Loch na h-Airde stand the well-preserved ruins of a dun or fort. The dun is built upon a rock that rises fifty feet sheer from the sea. This is the *dunan* or small fort from which Rudha an Dunain takes its name. It is one of the best-preserved duns in Skye. The one remaining wall is built of large stones, set one upon the other by master hands with infinite care and precision. It may be a relic of the time when the Norse ruled the Wingèd Isle, or may date from a still earlier period.

From the dun one looks down upon Sgeir Mhor, a low skerry that is an island at high tide. Here oyster-catchers feed as they fed in the days when the old fort held life within its walls, and the wanderer of to-day may see the same view which these old fort-dwellers saw. Eigg and Rhum and Soay, the coast of Sleat, and, at a still greater distance, Morar and "the firme land of Ardnamurchan," all are as they were in those distant times. Then, as now, the small waves break and send out the soft music of their making on the breeze, and with their low murmur the song of a curlew, half completed, blends in harmony.

The song of the curlew beside the waves is heard at Rudha an Dunain in winter only. When come the lengthening days of spring the songster leaves the shore of Skye (there is, if I mistake not, no single pair of curlews nesting in all this great island), and his sad cadences then fall upon the moorlands of the mainland of Scotland—moors that climb toward the country of the eagle and of the ptarmigan.

Dusk in winter comes early to the old fort upon the old territory of MacAskall. As twilight fades perhaps a quick-moving squall drives in from the west. Hill, glen, and sea are lashed by the rain. Of a sudden a blinding flash of lightning leaps across the sky, and the rattle of thunder mingles with the rush of the storm. Peal upon peal, flash upon flash succeed one another; the darkness is intense. But soon the storm passes on eastward, and Jupiter shines down upon the old house, the ruined fort, and the sea that is the same yesterday, to-day, and to-morrow.



LOCH COIRE A' GHRUNNDA: A TARN OF THE HIGH CUILLIN

THERE are few lochs in the corries of the Black Cuillin. Loch Coruisk, Loch na Creitheach, Loch an Athain—all are in the deep glens and lie less than a hundred feet above the Atlantic surf. In Coire Lagan of Sgurr Alasdair is a dark pool, but it is so small that it can scarcely be called a loch, and the only hill loch of the range in the true sense of the word is cradled in a delightful corrie 2400 feet above the sea. This corrie is Coire a' Ghrunnda, the Corrie of the Ground or Earth. It lies between Sgurr Alasdair and Sgurr nan Eag, and the loch is in its basin.

From no part of the low ground is Loch Coire a' Ghrunnda visible; it is guarded closely by the conical peaks of Sgurr Alasdair and its near neighbour Sgurr Mhic Choinnich, and on its farther shore by the steep, rocky slope of Sgurr nan Eag.

Loch Coire a' Ghrunnda lies high, yet its climate is not

cold, and one April day, when the lochs of the Cairngorms were beneath snow and ice, a friend of mine bathed in its clear waters! The spring sun shines strongly here, and from the hard winds out of the north and east the loch is sheltered by the hills that rise steeply from it.

On the second day of May I have seen the blaeberry plants near the loch in full leaf, and the purple mountain saxifrage in blossom.

On clear noons of early summer the golden eagle sails high above the loch. One day I saw a gathering of golden eagles here. In brilliant sunshine the first eagle sailed easily above the narrow ridge, east of the loch. From a different direction a second eagle appeared, then a third, fourth, and finally a fifth. High above the corrie the five magnificent birds met, flying up from north, south, east, and west. In the deep blue of the sky they soared awhile, gliding as steadily as aeroplanes. One pair, rising into the easterly wind, swung in circles to an immense height. A white cloud was hanging fully 4000 feet above the corrie, and into the cloud one of the eagles sailed mysteriously, gliding into its billowy depths. The male bird of the second pair swiftly dipped towards his larger mate. She, crossing above the barren cone of Sgurr Dubh, dropped, plummet-like, earthward in two magnificent headlong dives of frightful impetus. Finally this pair of eagles sailed leisurely across the smooth rock walls of Sgurr Sgumban, casting dark shadows on its glistening snowfields. One after another the five eagles disappeared from view, and the sky was void of bird-life as before.

There is no more delightful walk in the Cuillin than the climb to Loch Coire a' Ghrunnda and the hills above it.

Loch Coire a Garunnda of the Cuillin

Beneath the climber the ocean swell rolls in gently. On the Atlantic are many islands—Rhum, Eigg, and Canna, the Outer Isles, Mull of the Hills. It is always inspiring to see them rise from the restless plains of the ever-changing yet changeless ocean. At the mouth of Coire Lagan the climber crosses a stream of clear water with steep heathery banks where stunted hollies cling, then crosses moderately level ground at a height of 1000 feet above sea-level and reaches the base of Coire a' Ghrunnda where great slabs of brown rock alternate with pleasant heather-clad ground.

The symmetrical basin of Coire a' Ghrunnda lies behind steep, rocky slopes; there is just sufficient difficulty in climbing the approaches to the corrie to give a feeling of satisfaction when the climber reaches the loch.

In a series of falls a burn drops swiftly from the loch to the low ground. On grassy ledges beside the burn of Coire a' Ghrunnda the shapely golden-rod blooms late in summer, and cushions of *arabis* brighten the "scree." In July the bog asphodel flowers here, and sprays of golden St John's-wort mingle with it. *Achlasan Chaluim-chille* is the Celtic name of this graceful flower, since St Columba always carried it on his person. It was specially prized by the people of the Isles when found in the folds of the flocks, for it was an omen that the animals would prosper throughout the ensuing year. It was believed that the St John's-wort kept all evil from the person who, finding it unexpectedly, plucked it and carried it always in a secret place of safety.

The eastern shore of Loch Coire a' Ghrunnda is of dark sand that is the colour of earth. The sand stretches far out into the water, and may give the corrie its name—the Corrie of the Earth. On the surface of the submerged

sand small furrows are sometimes seen. In appearance they resemble minute wavelets, and are formed by the pounding of the waves on a day of storm. Above the sandy beach the rocks are bright with alpine flowers. Moss campion, cushion pink, rose root, sea thrift (in its alpine form), starry saxifrage, and milkwort — all these flowers grow beside this loch of the high Cuillin. From the loch a small rocky island rises. There are crannies in its rocks where alpine plants grow, and on its crown the hill grass is delightfully green. On the waters beside this islet water-beetles row themselves backwards and forwards, but no trout lives in this lonely lochan.

One quiet day of summer when I climbed to Coire a' Ghrunnda the mist closely enfolded the hill. So dense was the cloud that the farther shore of the loch was invisible. A chill breeze brought wavelets from out the unknown to break at my feet with faint music on the low shore. At times the cloud overhead became less dense, and it seemed as though the mist would lift. But always fresh clouds arrived from the invisible peaks and the corrie remained a place of ghostly vapours.

I had rested an hour beside the loch when the sky overhead changed from grey to blue. In little more than a minute the mist had rolled away, not only from the loch itself, but from the Cuillin that lean above it. The summit of Sgurr Alasdair is just 1000 feet above the waters of Loch Coire a' Ghrunnda, and it was a memorable experience to see the mist swiftly draw back and dissolve, revealing the silent loch, the rocky slopes of Sgurr Alasdair clear to the summit, and the sun upon Sgurr nan Eag. Faint clouds for a few minutes longer lay just below the crest of Sgurr

Alasdair, then they, too, faded, and the sun was supreme. The last of the mist-laden breeze had died away and now the small hill loch lay calm as a mirror.

From the ridge, 400 feet above Loch Coire a' Ghrunnda, later in the day I looked down upon the loch. There were many colours upon it. In the centre of the lochan the waters were pale grey. Near the northern shore, where the depth was greater, they were inky black, while above the sand they were dark brown. This day no eagle's wing darkened the surface of the tarn, but a mountain pipit rose from beside me and sailed easily down to the loch across great boulders of volcanic origin. Flying daintily across the loch, the small bird was reflected faithfully in the quiet surface.

Once more the mist began to enfold the hills. Where I stood was the dividing line between cloud and clear weather. Far below me Loch Coruisk lay. Often it is a loch of gloom and darkness. To-day the sun shone upon it and upon the waterfall that leapt eagerly from the loch to the mother ocean, so that peace and happiness replaced the greyness of twilight. The waters of Loch Scavaig, flooding submerged sands, were emerald. From these waters green, grassy islands rose, sun-bathed all of them.

From time to time a curtain of mist rolled up the *bealach* from the Garbh Choire, and a cold air-current of its own making glided with it over the dun stones as it shut out that scene of sunshine in Coruisk below. The mist crossed the pass; it slipped into Coire a' Ghrunnda. It strove to reach the loch, but was ever dispersed by the warm air in the corrie where the scent of the wild thyme lay. Eager

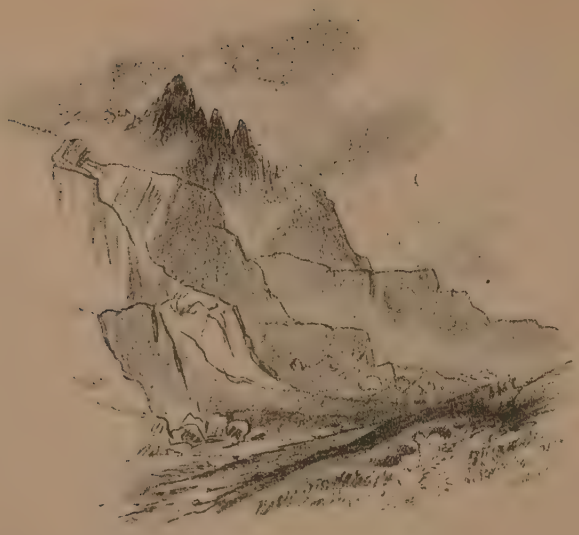
breezes more than once ruffled the calm surface of Loch Coire a' Ghrunnda. They were the herdsmen of the mists, and since the mists were lost to them they crossed the lochan aimlessly, as the clan of dreams that take their departure at sunrise. But the hills, although it was full day, continued to dream, and everywhere was a silence so intense that it could be felt—a silence broken once by the croak of a raven high among the rocks of Sgumban. Sun-glow upon hill mist is always a wonderful thing. The clouds to-day were so thin at times that the sun, penetrating them, burned faintly upon the hillside below the mist. A few yards from me rose Clach an t-Sionnaich, the Fox's Stone. This great pillar of rock was mist-encircled, faint and hazy, yet glowed as though afire. One minute it rose thus, with intangibility upon it, the next the mist dissolved and the rocky tower, clear-cut and no longer mysterious, stood with the full light of the summer sun upon it.

Towards evening the view from the corrie was such as the west alone can give. From a sunlit sea the Cuillin of Rhum rose steeply, light clouds resting upon their summits. Red sandy beaches alternated with dark headlands on that island of green pastures and heavy stags. Canna, Eigg, Muck, the point of Ardnamurchan, the Isle of Mull—all were clear, while upon Soay a thunder-shower gathered, then passed westward.

In Coire a' Ghrunnda itself there is little view southward, for Sgurr nan Eag rises steeply above it, but from the hill-slopes below the corrie the houses of Elgol could be seen and the boats that were anchored in its bay. There was shade here, but away beyond Loch Eiseord the pro-

montory of Sleat rose with sunlight upon it, and the ocean here was afire.

Evening brought a breeze from the north. It bore the last of the clouds from the hills, and when, an hour after sunset, the full moon of burnished gold climbed from the sea beyond Sleat, her light shone undimmed upon the lonely waters of Loch Coire a' Ghrunnda.



SGURR ALASDAIR, CHIEF OF THE BLACK CUILLIN

NO man could wish for a memorial more lasting or more wonderful than the dark, wind-swept pinnacle of Sgurr Alasdair.

The peak is named after the late Sheriff Alasdair Nicolson, a son of Skye, poet and writer, who, in 1873, first climbed to a summit that was hitherto considered inaccessible.

Sgurr Alasdair and its attendant peaks, seen from some outpost of the range on a winter's day, are memorable. The eye rests upon white spires, cones, and pinnacles. They rise like the hills of a land of dreams. Upon them is a wild and lonely beauty—a beauty that transports the spirit of him who sees it beyond the realm of time and space to a spiritual land of beauty, wonder, and mystery. But it is rare to see the Black Cuillin whitened thus with the snows of many nights, for the hills lie too near the Atlantic for winter to linger upon them. Perhaps for that very reason

they are the more arresting when seen to sleep, as they did in some remote ice age, beneath snowy cloaks.

Sgurr Alasdair (the earlier name for the hill is said to have been Sgurr Biorach [1]) rises to a height of 3309 feet, and is thus the highest of all Hebridean peaks. It is as a chief surrounded by the cadets of his clan, for all around it shapely peaks rise. Sgurr Mhic Choinnich is but a stone's-throw away. That hill is named after John MacKenzie of Sconser, the most celebrated mountain guide in Scotland, who is still climbing the Cuillin when most men of his age are content to sit in their comfortable arm-chairs. Then, immediately north of the *bealach*, at the head of the Great Stone Shoot, is another peak named after a noted climber. It is Sgurr Thearlaich (Charles's Peak), and the Charles immortalised is Charles Pilkington.

Sixty years ago the Cuillin were considered to be inaccessible. Then the peaks, one after the other, were climbed by pioneers, and now each hill, spur, and rocky pinnacle has been scaled not once but scores upon scores of times.

There is still an impression that the Cuillin are a field for rock-climbers, and that they are too steep and rocky for more modest walkers. This is not so. Personally, I have never climbed on a rope, yet without any difficulty I have climbed Bruach na Frìthe, Sgurr na Banachdich, Sgurr nan Eag, and Gars Bheinn. Sgurr Alasdair and Sgurr Dearg are rather harder climbs, but it is curious that the so-called "Tourist Route" up Sgurr nan Gillean should be distinctly harder than any I have mentioned. I suppose that the two easiest climbs in the Cuillin are Bruach na Frìthe and Sgurr

[1] Sgurr Biorach is, the Pointed Peak.

na Banachdich. Any moderate walker can climb these two hills; any lady can climb them provided she wears stout shoes. And the view from either peak is so magnificent that I am convinced many more people would climb to enjoy it did they realise that the formidable appearance of the hills is deceptive. Mist is the danger on the Cuillin, for the mist curtain drops within the space of five minutes, and in mist it is easy to lose one's way and find oneself on the brink of one of the many precipices. The Cuillin should be avoided on days of strong winds, because their ridges are so narrow that they are unsafe in a gale.

A morning of frost, without wind, had been succeeded by a grey forenoon, and down in Glen Brittle the breeze was now freshening. At first each Cuillin summit was clear, but soon white clouds on the wind appeared. They rested upon each spire, they spilled over into each corrie, falling with the slow motion of water at the top of some cascade. But as soon as they were full-formed these cloudlets were dispelled, and once more the range of the Cuillin stood out against the autumn sky.

From Glen Brittle the aspect of Sgurr Alasdair is impressive; indeed, those who know the Cuillin only from Sligachan have no conception of their added charm and grandeur when viewed from Glen Brittle beside the Atlantic.

One climbs to Sgurr Alasdair by way of Coire Lagan. This is a fine corrie, 2000 feet above the sea, with green grass for its floor and grim bastions of sheer rock and dark boulders for its walls.

In Coire Lagan is a lochan. It is a small tarn, but in its centre is a deep cavity where the water must be fifteen feet in depth. Perhaps a spring issues forth from the hill

here; perhaps the hollow may have been scooped out by some whirlwind during a winter hurricane. The water of the lochan is tinged with green, for at dawn fairies cleanse their green garments in it. In Skye the lady fairies are dressed in green. The men are called the little red fellows —*na daoine beaga ruadh*—and are clad in crotal-dyed garments.

A small stream leaves the tarn and flows quietly over the floor of the corrie. Where it drops in waterfalls to the ground below the remains of an old wall are seen. That old wall, it is said, is a relic of a day when there was a summer shieling in Coire Lagan, and the wall was built to keep back the goats which gave the crofter and his family their milk.

Surely no more remote site for a summer shieling could be found. On every side, except westward, lofty peaks rise. North, across a wilderness of boulders, Sgurr Dearg towers. South, the black precipices of Sgurr Alasdair hide the autumn sun, so that the corrie lies in deep shade until late afternoon. In winter the Atlantic gales rush through Coire Lagan, and short-lived thunderstorms pass upon the wings of the tempest, so that the corrie is lit by flickering lightning and is deafened by reverberating thunder. Everywhere beneath the corries of the Cuillin great rocks lie amongst the heather where they came to rest thousands of years ago, after their leaping descent from the hills above. Their thunderous fall must have sent echoes through the hills, perhaps scaring a wandering bear or a lean wolf at his hunting. Long heather now grows from some of these boulder-tops, so that they appear to be (when seen at a distance) the thatched houses of some primitive village.

From Coire Lagan the usual ascent of Sgurr Alasdair is up a gully that has been named by climbers the Great Stone Shoot. From the corrie this ascent is some 1300 feet, and the climb is over loose stones and boulders that slide downward at each forward step. At first the climber has the fear that he may be carried upon the sliding rocks to the corrie below, but after a time he begins to realise that the stones do not slide far, and that the slope is less formidable than it appears.

From the rock walls on either side the gully water was dripping this autumn day. As it reached the "scree" the water became ice, so that each stone and boulder bore a glassy surface.

Here and there hard-frozen drifts of snow lay. A golden eagle, disturbed by the moving rocks, rose from his giddy perch and sailed across Sgurr Alasdair.

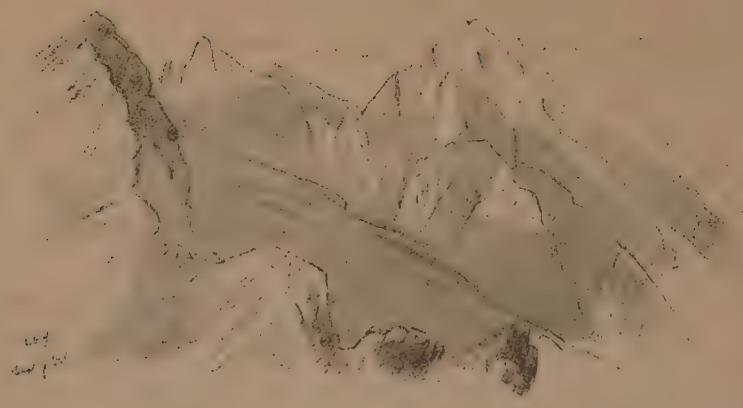
At length the "col" was reached, and from here to the hill-top the climb was along a narrow ridge with immense precipices on either side. There is little enough space on the summit of Sgurr Alasdair. With me on the climb was my collie Dileas, and John MacKenzie, who accompanied us, believed that she was the first dog to stand on the hill-top. But she was not happy, for there was actually no room for her to lie down on the small summit!

A plant of *saxifraga stellaris* grew on the hill-top. This alpine plant evidently finds the Cuillin tops to its liking, for it is found also upon the very summit of Sgurr na Banachdich, and doubtless on other of the tops besides. In niches of the rock *salix herbacea* showed small golden leaves, for it too clings to the highest spires of the Cuillin.

A freshening breeze was sending white-capped waves

across the Atlantic as we sat behind the small cairn of Sgurr Alasdair, and a haze was creeping across the distant hills of Mull. Nearer was Rhum, of which Dean Monro (1549) wrote, ". . . ane ile callit Ronin ile, ane forest of heigh mountains, and abundance of little deir in it." Around us rose jagged peaks and spires. On some of them the wingèd clouds rested lightly: all were dark with the darkness of night. Here we seemed to stand upon the roof of the world, in a land where fairies hunted aerial deer, where the *each uisge* and the *tarbh uisge* fought fierce battles with none to see them but Fionn and his warrior band.

In gathering dusk we walked and slid down the Great Stone Shoot, so that the moving stones in friction gave off a curious smell, and later from Glen Brittle saw the cone of Sgurr Alasdair tower dark against the evening sky.



SGURR DEARG BY NIGHT

SGURR DEARG, the Red Peak, is (Sgurr Alasdair excepted) the highest of the Cuillin, and the slender cairn set precariously upon its narrow summit is 3254 feet above the level of the Atlantic that shimmers below it.

On paper the heights of the Cuillin appear small, but it must be remembered that these hills rise straight from the sea, whereas the glens from which the Cairngorms climb are a full 1500 feet above sea-level.

Sgurr Dearg at a distance may be identified by its Inaccessible Pinnacle. It rises from Glen Brittle, where the grass was green when I climbed the hill and the air fragrant with wild rose and wild orchis. The midsummer sun shone with great power. The bloom-laden rowan trees held their scented flower-heads to the deep blue, cloudless sky.

In actual distance Sgurr Dearg is not far from Glen Brittle, but the climb is steep and rocky, and in the fierce sun each thousand feet laboriously gained seemed double the height. On the lower slopes of the hill were many rabbits, and a pair of buzzards sailed leisurely above the gorge where their eyrie was concealed. Gradually the zone of grass was

left behind, and at a height of 1500 feet the hill was deserted, and the rocks and *scree* seemed at first glance to be barren as desert wastes. And yet, did one look closely, one saw many alpine plants here. Violets were everywhere. They hung out their blue petals from beneath the stones, on small grassy ledges, upon islets of grass. In one place a colony of sea thrift was flourishing amongst the arid scree—the only living thing to be seen there. Although the season was early July the plants had not yet flowered, but their buds were well formed and of a deep crimson. Did they know that, fifteen hundred feet beneath, their brothers on the shore were growing in a larger company by far, and had blossomed at least a month before?

Up a rocky forge where *rubus saxitilis* grew I climbed, then looked across to Sgurr Alasdair that raised its spire beyond Coire Lagan.

The ascent of Sgurr Dearg is deceptive. The climber reaches what is apparently the end of the climb, and then finds unexpectedly ahead of him the last few hundred feet to the actual hill-top, along a disquietingly narrow ridge where the rocks are grim and formidable although the foothold is always good. In a time of strong wind it would be hazardous even for experienced climbers to cross this ridge. Thus there is just sufficient element of risk in conquering those last few hundred feet of ridge to add to the satisfaction of reaching the hill-top.

It was ten o'clock at night, and I was standing upon the summit of Sgurr Dearg in the light of the setting sun. Around me was a fairy-like country, mysterious, delightful, inspiring. It spoke quietly of Eilean Uaine, the Green Isle, to which the spirit, but not the body, may attain. The sun

was now low on the north-west horizon. It shed a faint pink light upon the hill-top where I stood, and also upon the surrounding peaks. In that light even the flowers of the rose root and the starry saxifrage were transformed. They assumed new tints, so that at first glance they appeared to be strange, unknown flowers. The violets were blue no longer, but glowing purple; the small buds of the moss campion were afire.

On this narrow hill-top I sat, with the spell of the Cuillin upon me, and watched the sunset.

North-west the sky was clear, but a grey cloud, of great extent, crept up from the south. Ardnamurchan, Mull, Barra were hidden in haze, and I wondered if I should see the full splendour of the sunset before that advancing cloud had reached the north-west horizon. Slowly the sun dipped. The path of its rays, reflected in the sea, changed from silver to a gold that each moment became deeper. In the line of this glowing track the Maidens of MacLeod stood out, three dark figures.

Northward crept the sun. In its last rays Sgurr nan Gillean glowed richly, but on the corries the fingers of night were already resting. The rocks were warm. The air was mild and still. Beside me rose the Inaccessible Pinnacle, a faint glow of pink light suffusing its dark walls. From the deeps of Coire na Banachdich came the croak of a ptarmigan. At times was heard faintly the dull surge of the swell upon the shore of Loch Brittle more than three thousand feet below—a sound seeming to belong to another world. Still more faintly came the music of the burn that drains Coire na Banachdich.

All nature awaited in suspense the moment of sunset.

MARSCO AND GLEN SLIGACHAN

At last, at twenty-five minutes to eleven (I refer, of course, to summer time, although in Skye summer time is not generally observed by the people), the rim of the sun touched the far-distant horizon beyond the Sound of Harris. There it quivered and throbbed, then at last was gone.

It was easy in imagination to see Manannan, God of the Ocean, pass in his magic chariot, drawn by his steed Splendid Mane, along that golden, vanishing pathway, as he travelled from the Land of Mortals to Tir nan Og. It was easy to visualise Etain speeding with Midir to his home beyond mortal ken, while Eochaidh, High King of Ireland and her mortal husband, paced the halls of his palace with darkness upon his mind. No one who has seen a summer sunset from the Cuillin can fail to sense the nearness of things spiritual. The half-forgotten Celtic gods, the Fairies or *Daoine Sithe*, the Spirit of the Hills, the mysterious Spirit-forces of the sea—all these are more closely joined to him than the affairs of everyday life.

At sunset the hills changed. They glowed no longer. They stood around, a silent and solemn company, with the pale greyness of age upon their rocks, telling of immense, silent strength and of infinite peace.

Following the sunset came the afterglow. It crept northward, following the path of the hidden sun, and at midnight the northern sky burned as though afire. All through the night Sgurr a' Mhadaidh rose against that glow, its rocky summit black and mysterious. It kept watch (so it appeared to me) more steadfastly than its fellows. As the hours passed it seemed to become alive and to speak with friendliness: I looked at it always with pleasure.

Full of beauty was the night sky. High in the western heavens rode the young moon, her light of faint gold, and when she disappeared Arcturus took her place. At midnight long bars of blue cloud floated against the pale pink of the afterglow where it merged, toward the zenith, into the night sky. Suddenly, away to the north, I saw three quick stabs of light. At intervals they came. Sometimes I was able to count them with ease, sometimes they were almost invisible. They came from the far-distant lighthouse on Eilean Glas of Harris.

The light of the invisible sun bathed the summit of Sgurr Dearg all that night. It was at one o'clock that the twilight was most sombre. About this time I saw a tiny flash of light burn for an instant upon the rocky flank of Sgurr na Banachdich. Perhaps an underground dwelling of the *sithe* had for an instant opened its door. A few minutes later a long lane of light extended eastward from that hill-top, and floated in the quiet sky like some glowing banner. Then, as I looked again, the fairy flag had changed to a dragon's head, with jaws wide open.

Below the grey mist that was floating in from the south the rays of Hyskeir flickered, and were reflected in the invisible waters beneath them. Those light flashes were of a warm orange colour. Curiously enough only twice during the night did I see the powerful ray of the Neist lighthouse, yet on each occasion when I saw it the beam was brilliant and unmistakable.

At two o'clock the night wind came to the hills. It crept, in little puffs and eddies, into the hollow amongst the rocks where I was seated. Now for the first time I felt doubtful whether the sun would rise upon Sgurr Dearg, for

a bank of clouds, low, dark, and moving at speed, passed across the afterglow. I crossed the ridge, and felt the wind cold and chill. Soon appeared overhead the vanguard of the approaching mists from the south. Although the upper clouds remained almost motionless, these thin vapours were moving at disquieting speed.

I returned to my shelter. Again, in half an hour's time, I looked across to Sgurr Alasdair. The sight that I saw was grand and wonderful. The ocean clouds had reached the hill. They pressed upon it in wild disarray, like some primitive army. Down the Great Stone Shoot they poured, surging in upon Coire Lagan impetuously. As yet I was in clear weather: as yet Sgurr a' Mhadaidh rose serenely against the afterglow. But now I knew that in a few minutes the clouds must sweep across Sgurr Dearg where I stood, and I accordingly decided to descend. The first few hundred feet of that narrow ridge were not easy to pass. In dark twilight, and in thick and increasing mist, the rocks seemed to yield reluctantly, but at last I was below the steepest part of the ridge, and here I waited awhile, hoping against hope that the thickening cloud layer would pass by before sunrise.

All through the night hours I had looked across to where Beinn Stor of northern Skye rose upon the horizon. At sunset it had glowed, then gradually changed to blue, and, with the coming of twilight, seemed to float in air so that it gave the illusion of some distant isle. Now at last it was gone: now at last the rays of Hyskeir could no longer reach me. Gradually the eastward view faded also. The cold basin of Loch Hourn, the grey waters of Loch Eiseord, the serrated outline of Sleat, even the lochs of Soay so close

below me—all these vanished, and in their place I saw only the grey ghostly company of the silent mists, speeding in from the ocean to cover the Cuillin with their soft mantle.

Although it was near sunrise the sky was leaden, and the darkness greater than at any time during the night. Where I now sat was below the cloud-level, but, far below me, what appeared to be a cloud crept in from the sea and filled Glen Brittle. After a time I came to realise that this was no cloud, but a heavy shower.

The shower drifted slowly up the glen, then began to climb. Soon it reached Sgurr Dearg. The dry hillside it refreshed, flowing in rivulets from the rock behind which I crouched. A blue hare scampered down the steep slope a few yards from me. Her ears were laid back; she looked surprised and miserable as she hurried before the shower to the shelter of her "form" somewhere amongst the rocks below.

I looked across to Rudha an Dunain and saw the loch, where the boats of the MacAskalls were kept of old, misty with rain: I looked back to the crest of Sgurr Dearg where the clouds were massing more thickly, and now I realised that the sunrise had eluded me. But the memory of that sunset, and of the afterglow that turned midnight into day, remained to me as a precious gift of the Spirit of the Black Cuillin.

Another sunset from the flank of Sgurr Dearg I recall.

Across the Black Cuillin winter had thrown her cloak of white. Each corrie was the resting-place of snows, each shelf of the great precipices was whitened. Across the ocean wandering showers drifted. Most of these showers

passed Sgurr Dearg by, but one of them crossed the hill, and, as it hurried overhead, the stinging hail hissed among the heather and the rocks streamed.

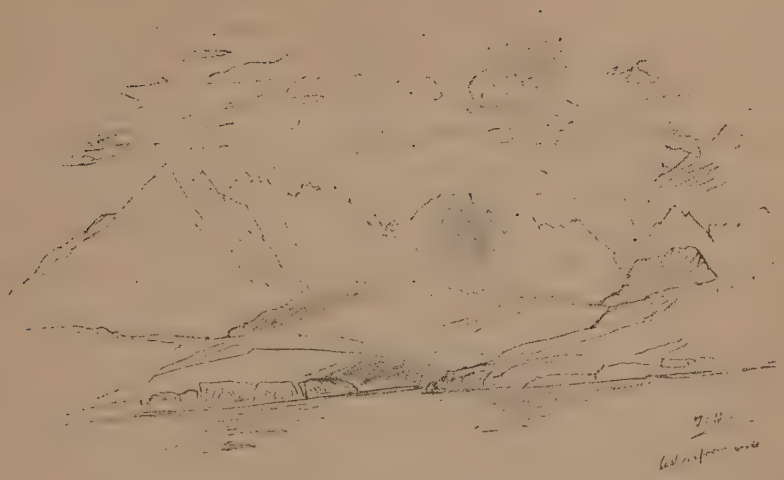
The sun towards its setting was hidden from the Cuillin by drifting clouds that day, but upon the horizon, many miles to the south-west, a golden window opened, and here was a light that rose up from ocean deeps and burned with strong and steady glow. Although so many showers steered their aerial course above the sea, the north-western horizon was clear, and through my glass I could see the lonely lighthouse of the Monach Isles, at least fifty miles distant. It rose, a remote needle-like object, from its small grassy isle. For the space of perhaps a minute the lighthouse was dark. Then came a faint glimmer (as though a match that was too wet to burn was being struck) across many miles of sea, and I realised that I had seen the actual lighting of the Monach lamp. At intervals of about twelve seconds this small candle-like flame (for thus it appeared) stabbed the soft dusk. The telescope revealed it, but to the unaided eye it was invisible.

A few seconds after the kindling of the Monach beacon the light of Uisinish of South Uist burned up. It trembled and quivered in the twilight, then was slowly dimmed.

The dusk deepened, and now overhead showed the white rays of distant stars. North-west that great sun, Arcturus—he who in old Celtic lore is Beur Theinne, the Lordly Fiery One—shone through the stupendous abyss of space. Immediately overhead was Vega, pale and remote; north were the diamond-like shafts of the Plough. Golden in the south-west Jupiter shone, and near her a sickle-shaped ribbon of light lay. This was the new moon—in Gaelic

an sollus ur (the new light)—shedding her rays seawards toward sleeping Canna.

The Cuillin freed themselves of cloud to gaze upon that innumerable company of stars. They watched Mars of the ruddy glow wander westward and Jupiter sink beneath the wave. Thus did sunset and winter dusk swiftly give place to night on the slopes of Sgurr Dearg, and the eye rested upon the lamps of the sea beneath and the lamps of the stars above, while the flowing tide slipped, sighing, over the pebbles of the invisible shore.



SGURR NA BANACHDICH

THE fisherman laying his nets on Loch Carron of a September night sees the sun sink in splendour behind the Cuillin hills of Skye. On the western horizon the great range rises, immersed in a bath of glowing light. A little to the north of the shapely cone of Sgurr Alasdair he sees a serrated and (so it seems from Loch Carron) flat-topped hill, having as its neighbours Sgurr Dearg to the south and Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh to the north.

This is Sgurr na Banachdich, the Pitted Peak, or, as some believe, the Hill of the Dairymaid.

Sgurr na Banachdich rises dark, massive, and shapely from the green depths of Glen Brittle, with Sgurr nan Gobhar on its western flank. On a day of grey mist I have stood upon its tapering summit and looked into the abyss where Coire a' Ghreadaidh nestled invisible in eddying vapours a thousand feet below. In a rainstorm I have

sheltered near the hill-top, beneath an overhanging rock, and watched the water drip in an ever-increasing cascade to the ground beneath it, while I listened to the music of the rain-laden wind among the invisible precipices.

But, sooner or later, there comes a day when the clouds are uplifted on the north wind, and in the light of the mellow autumn sun that shines warm upon hill and glen, Sgurr na Banachdich is an altogether delightful place.

As one seeks its summit from Glen Brittle, one climbs first beside the burn that drains Coire a' Ghreadaidh. It is a stream of clear water with swift rushes, pale green pools, and white waterfalls. Beside it, on a late September day, the blue flower-heads of the scabious mingle with the last of the heather. The hill grass is green no longer, but covers the hillside with a warm brown mantle. At the head of the corrie Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh rises, a dark hill that appears so steep and rocky as to be inaccessible to all save expert rock climbers.

There was darkness upon Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh this September day, but on Sgurr na Banachdich the sun was brilliant, and when an old raven, with the spell of the fine weather upon him, commenced to soar in spirals upward as an eagle might have done, the sun glinted upon his black feathers so that they shone and glistened.

One passed through grassy Coire an Eich, where rabbits in their hundreds were abroad, and now, looking back, one saw the waters of the Minch and the hills of South Uist rising beyond it. The air was blue; the sea blue, serene. Never, surely, had the Uist hills appeared more beautiful. They were of a curiously vital spiritual blue, intensely alive. Floating mists lay upon Hecla. Nebulous, elusive, they

rose and fell, increased and decreased. On Beinn Mhor, too, they rested. Corodale was free of cloud.

Upward one climbed, and now Sgurr nan Gobhar, which in the glen beneath had seemed almost as lofty as Sgurr na Banachdich itself, rose far below. Dark clouds had come to rest upon the northern Cuillin. They rose, dropped again, yet scarcely moved, for there was little wind to herd them. Through a window in these overshadowing clouds was seen the vision of a sun-bathed land. It appeared beyond the darkness as a fairy country, in which one saw Rona and, across the sea, the houses and the coast of Gairloch.

Upon northern Skye, too, the autumn sun shone, and to the north there was a rich light upon hill and sea—a light such as one sees upon the sun-bathed coast of the Crimea or beside Mediterranean shores. Fragments of rainbow coloured the north horizon, where showers drifted beside the Harris hills.

The sun was hot as the climber crossed An Diallaid (the Saddle) and gained the ridge above the high precipice of Coire a' Ghreadaidh. Beyond the deep shade that brooded upon the corrie, Sgurr Thuilm rose in sunshine so clear that the darkness upon Sgurr a' Mhadaidh beyond it was the more noticeable. South and west the sky was clear and blue, and when at last the narrow summit of Sgurr na Banachdich was reached the view from it was memorable because of its great beauty.

The clouds which towered above the distant Atlantic were indescribably lovely. They brought to the mind the old poetical description of Flath-innis, the Celtic Isle of the Heroes—"Here the trees are alive with music. The clouds

of that isle are bright and transparent, and each involves in its bosom the source of a beauteous stream, which, wandering down the steep, is like the faint notes of the half-touched harp to the distant ear." It was not hard for the old seers and dreamers to visualise the Land of the Spirit across western seas when the ocean spell and the hill spell mingled their virtues.

Even more wonderful than the shadowy forms of the clouds was the light upon the sea. Almost immediately below Sgurr na Banachdich is Loch Brittle. The sea here was of a dazzling whiteness that merged, at the edge of the sun's path, into the brilliance of molten metal. Out by Canna Isle the ocean was silver. Beyond that island the waters of the Atlantic were bronze, and on the far horizon, where sea and sky met (this must have been close on a hundred miles distant), the ocean glowed with the warmth of flowing gold. From this intensely vital sea the lighthouse upon far Skerryvore rose needle-like from its dark rock. So clear was the air that distant isles seemed close at hand. Tiree was dark and blue. The sands of Coll gleamed.

Clearly the distant Dubh Hirteach lighthouse showed beside Colonsay where trawlers fished upon a golden sea. Dubh Hirteach is just seventy-seven miles from Sgurr na Banachdich; it was visible through the glass across the eastern shoulder of Rhum. But the most distant objects of all were the Paps of Jura, ninety-two miles away, which could be seen with the unaided eye.

Sea and sky were constantly changing. Gliding south, above the Minch, were white clouds that grew in size. A cloud came to rest lightly upon MacLeod's Table beside

Dunvegan, but in sunshine MacLeod's Maidens rose from the sea.

Upon the still air the sound of the streams of Cor Uisge ascended in waves. In the depths of Coire na Banachdich water sparkled like diamonds. From the corrie came a raven's echoing croak. Impressive and inspiring, the surrounding Cuillin peaks towered into the sky. The Inaccessible Pinnacle of Sgurr Dearg seemed to crouch man-like.

Above the sea the air was blue and luminous. It was as though the magic mist—*Ceò Dhruidhnich*—lay upon it. Across Rhum rose faintly Dun I of Iona, which Columb of the Cell so often climbed. The Abbey Church of Iona, and even the houses of the isle, were distinct through the glass.

High above the Sound of Sleat silvered clouds were passing. Through their curtain distant Ben Nevis for a moment showed. Loch Nevis and Loch Hourn were painted with mystic colours. Clouds were here also, but Sleat was bathed in sun, and Tarscavaig of the sands seemed a pleasant place.

Quietly the mists drifted south, and now Hyskeir lay beneath the shade of a silver-fringed cloud. The light-house of Barra Head rose on the far horizon, and across Eriskay could be seen the Atlantic Ocean, that stretched westward without land to the Labrador coast.

Upon the Cuillin deep shadow and brilliant sunshine contrasted magnificently. In sunshine were the Red Hills. In darkest shade were Sgurr a' Mhadaidh and Bruach na Frìthe, and on these heights the mist curtain dropped ever lower. Beyond the encroaching mist on Sgurr Thuilm the

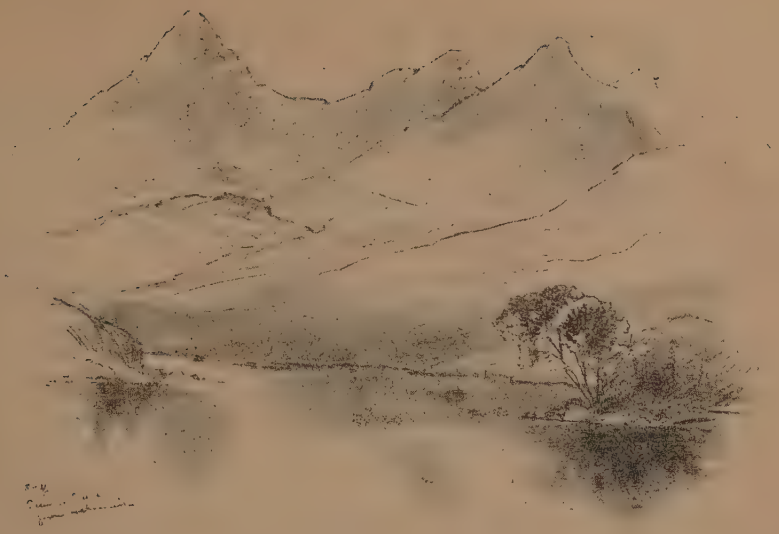
hill grasses were aflame. Although Sgurr a' Mhadaidh was enshrouded, Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh remained clear. Here is Coire an Uaigneis, Corrie of Loneliness, that was well named by the islesmen of old.

The touch of warm life that quickens the solitudes of the Cuillin came unexpectedly when a ptarmigan rose from the rocky slope of Sgurr na Banachdich. Perhaps she had been dreaming, and had aroused herself to see strangers in her country. On white wings she crossed the hill, then soared out over the abyss above Coire a' Ghreadaidh and vanished from view. Ptarmigan are so rare in the Cuillin that the sight of one gave further pleasure to a memorable climb.

A dark rock beside the cairn of Sgurr na Banachdich formed an eagle's perch. Here the shapely rosettes of the starry saxifrage, rose root, and alpine willow all grew together.

From this eagle's perch one looked upon the wild pass across the Cuillin between Sgurr na Banachdich and Sgurr Dearg. The head of this pass has long been known as An Dorus Mór—in English, the Great Door. It is curious that the position of An Dorus Mór should have been given wrongly on the present-day maps. In the maps it is marked considerably to the north of Sgurr na Banachdich, so that it is only right that the error should be mentioned before the true position has been forgotten.

The silver path of the sun was now moving toward the west, but the scattered clouds were joining hands above the Cuillin, and before sunset the whole range was close-wrapped in mist.



IN THE SHADOW OF THE BLACK CUILLIN

BRUACH NA FRÌTHE[1]

THERE is no hill range of Scotland which varies so greatly in aspect as the Cuillin of Skye.

With the weather their mood changes suddenly. They smile or are sad; they frown and are terrible. The dun wind from the Atlantic reaches their blue, clear-cut spires, and immediately a mist curtain is drawn across them; before the coming of a storm they clothe themselves with the blue mantle of mystery.

Then there are days (and the day of which I write was one of them) when the Cuillin are alive with benign spiritual forces; when the hill silence tells of many wonderful things; when hill, sky, and ocean glow with life and energy.

The morning was dark. Mist enshrouded the hills.

[1] *Bruach na Frìthe.* The Brae of the Forest. So named because it was the dividing line between the deer forest and the sheep ground in former days.

The air was close. Rain fell heavily. At noon came the sure signs of approaching fine weather. Among the heavy clouds windows of blue sky showed. The dark edges of the clouds became silvered. Each moment the Cuillin were changing. About Sgurr nan Gillean white mists, radiant in sun-flood, formed a girdle. Blaven, mysterious to the south, showed dark buttresses faint behind floating vapours. Eastward, above the hills of the mainland, great thunder-clouds towered.

The green and pleasant Fionn Choire was flooded in sunlight, and as I climbed it (over ground carpeted with bright flowers) an unsurpassed view north and west gradually unfolded itself. First the northern hills of Skye appeared, then Harris and, a few minutes later, the hills of North Uist. Over all that great expanse of land, and on the sea that linked it, sun and shade alternated. In the Bay of Portree white yachts lay at anchor. Raasay, Rona, Rudha Reidh, the pleasant islets of the Minch, the dark skirts of MacLeod's Maidens at the entrance to Loch Bracadale, the huge needle rock of Stor—all were clear and inviting.

At the head of the Fionn Choire was a vast silence, broken only by the drip of a small burn over steel-blue stones. Motionless above the corrie a dark cloud floated. Here was shade; all around was sun-flood, so that the eye looked from darkness to light—the soft mellow sunlight of western seas that speak so strongly to those who understand their message.

In damp crannies among the rocks the starry saxifrage opened its pale petals; upon the velvety moss the tiny alpine willow laid its small, shapely, green leaves, close

pressed to the surface of the ground against summer gales. Here and there were the small yellow flowers of the tormentil. Upon stony knolls the wild thyme showed delicately tinted florets of pink.

The ridges of the Cuillin are knife-like. So narrow are they, and so steep are the slopes that lead up to them, that all view beyond the hill-top is hidden until the last second. Thus the sudden view from a Cuillin summit on a clear day is always a memorable experience, for in the fraction of a second the eye rests upon an immense expanse of new country.

There was no wind drifting across the summit of Bruach na Frìthe this day of late summer. Around me, but especially to the east, were dark grey clouds suspended motionless in a sky of surpassing beauty. Upon Sleat, rising across Loch Scavaig, the sun shone; near at hand was a haze, as of Manannan's making. Now gentle airs stirred and herded the sleeping clouds this way and that. Surrounding me rose the Cuillin, spire upon spire. The colours on Sgurr Alasdair were unusual. Full of life, full of poetry, they momently changed. Peace and a vast serenity dwelt upon the Cuillin this day. The tides of the air were stilled. The tides of the tranquil sea flowed as though asleep.

To me there is always a special delight in seeing the distant island of St Kilda from the Cuillin of Skye. It may be because the small isle lies so far westward, and is the last outpost that shows the way to Tir nan Og. St Kilda is ninety-six miles from Bruach na Frìthe, and yet on two of the three occasions on which I have climbed that hill I have seen St Kilda.

To-day the air was so clear that the unaided eye could distinguish the great cliff of Conachair—a twelve hundred feet sheer drop to Atlantic deeps—where the sounding waves break unceasingly. North of St Kilda itself stood the lesser uninhabited isle of Boreray. It rose, blue and cloud-like, across the shoulder of Eaval of North Uist. Beside it the great rock, Stac Lii, where solans cluster in their thousands to nest, was unmistakable.

Across the Minch the Outer Hebrides seemed close at hand. From one of the uninhabited isles of Barra a column of thin, cream-coloured smoke rose into the air. Perhaps some islesman was signalling for a boat. On the sea above Benbecula a small white cloud formed. Like a puff of smoke it grew—round, symmetrical, hanging motionless above the blue sea. Then, as I looked again, it was gone.

The beauty of the ocean was unusual. On the waters were paths of light and shade, crossing and re-crossing one another. The sun sparkled upon the water. Far out on the Minch a gentle breeze drew a dark blue line across the sea. On the distant Sound of Harris the waters were asleep. Here they were pale blue, but upon the open Atlantic, beyond the Outer Hebrides, a breeze darkened the sea. Beyond this zone of wind the western ocean was troubled by no wandering air. But far below me, upon Loch Scavaig, were little flurries of wind.

Never had I seen the Cuillin so smiling. There was nothing austere, nothing forbidding, about them to-day. Each moment the light was changing. Now the shapely cone of Sgurr nan Gillean was in deep shade, while upon the summit of Bruach na Frìthe the sun shone brightly. Now a dark cloud spread its shadow above Bruach na Frìthe,

while upon Sgurr nan Gillean was sunlight. Far below me lay Coire na Criche, with its Cave of the Arrows and its Cairn of the Three Normans. Almost always this corrie is gloomy. To-day it was bright and smiling; it appeared full of hope. Indeed, a spirit of hope pervaded the Cuillin this day with curious intensity.

Sometimes when the climber is resting upon the summit of Bruach na Frìthe a thin mist envelops the hill. The sun shining upon this mist lights a fleeting fog-bow here. A fog-bow is, as it were, the ghost of a rainbow. In it all the rainbow colours are woven, yet they are dim, and the bow is more transient even than the rainbows that are so often lighted above western seas.

The afternoon wore on. The westering sun was now lighting the approaches to that intangible land which was visualised by the old Celtic dreamers and seers. Tir nan Og (the Land of Youth), Tir na Sorcha (the Land of Light), the Land of Peace, Silver-cloud Plain—these are some of the names given to a land "wherein there is nought save truth, and there is neither age, nor disintegration, nor gloom, nor sadness, nor envy, nor jealousy, nor hatred, nor haughtiness."

On the far horizon was one primrose-tinted cloud. It must have been a full hundred miles distant. It rose from the ocean and towered motionless, immense, massive, into the remote blue of the sky.

The sun sank, and the Cuillin were luminous in a bath of glowing purple. Upon the ocean, she who in the old legends is called the lady-wife of the Celtic sea-god, Manannan Mac Lir, was a singularly lovely tint of jade which, towards the west, imperceptibly merged into crimson as the last of the

sunfire rested upon her face. Behind the hills of Harris dark tenuous streamers of cloud rose: they gave the illusion that some great fire burned across many leagues of distant horizon. Night came, and, while the last of the sunset still remained, the full moon, golden-orbed and wise, climbed above the heights.

CARN NAN TRI TORMOD

THE traveller, passing over the hill track which leads from Sligachan (the Place of Shells) across the Maam to Glen Brittle and Rudha an Dunain may observe, near the entrance to Coire na Criche, what appears to be the *moraine* left by some glacier. Here a number of grassy mounds rise. The place is known to the old people as Tom nan Tighearnan, the Knoll of the Lords, and commemorates the last clan fight in Scotland.

The historic Battle of Beinn a' Chuillin in Coire na Criche was fought in the year 1602. Donald Gorm Mór of Sleat, chief of the MacDonalds, had crossed with his men to MacLeod's Country, perhaps on a cattle raid. Rorie Mór, the chief of MacLeod, was absent at the time seeking aid from the Earl of Argyll, but his brother, Alexander MacLeod of Minginish, hurriedly collected as many clansmen as possible, and in a dark corrie of the Cuillin the fight was fought. Donald Mór MacCrimmon was

MacLeod's piper at the time, and we may surmise that he urged his clansmen to still further efforts by the immortal melody of his fingers, the while the corrie was dyed with the blood of the slain and the tartans of MacDonald and MacLeod lay in confusion upon grey stones and brown heather.

The fight, we are told, was waged all day "with incredible obstinacy." Beneath the light of the moon it was ended, and at last victory lay with the MacDonalds. MacLeod of Minginish (who was sheathed in armour) was wounded and taken prisoner, together with thirty of the leading men of the clan. The prisoners were afterwards released on the intervention of the king. Domhnall Mac Iain 'Ic Sheumais, who was the ancestor of the MacDonalds of Kingsburgh, was an outstanding figure during the fight and worked much execution among the MacLeods.

The Battle of Beinn a' Chuillin is remembered to-day by a small cairn on one of the green mounds of Tom nan Tighearnan. This primitive cairn is known as Carn nan Tri Tormod (in English, the Cairn of the Three Normans) and marks the spot where three kinsmen of Rorie Mór were slain.

Few of the stones of Carn nan Tri Tormod remain. It is more than three hundred years since they were placed in position. Three hundred winters of storm and of driven snow have passed over them, and the stones are now dark and weather-beaten, and deeply embedded in the ground.

Near Carn nan Tri Tormod, upon the second of the three knolls, are the last remaining stones of another small cairn. There is a tradition that MacAskall of Rudha died here, or

was buried here after the fight. The MacAskalls of Rudha were tacksmen of MacLeod for many centuries.[1]

A hundred yards south of Carn nan Tri Tormod are seen a number of flat slabs of stone, which cover a slightly raised strip of ground perhaps fifteen feet in length. It seems likely that these slabs mark the resting-place of others killed at this clan fight.

A mile or more to the north of Tom nan Tighearnan is a larger cairn marking the spot where another gentleman of Clan Leoid died. Grievously wounded, he was carried by his servant up the hillside that led towards his own country; and where, in full view of the great Cuillin range, he succumbed to his wounds a cairn was built to his memory according to the old Highland custom.

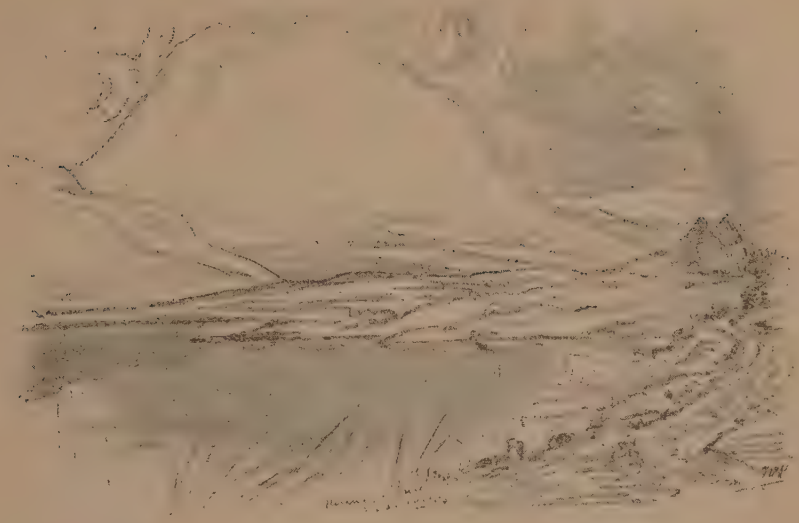
Coire na Criche is more often than not a place of mist and dark shade, but on the day when I stood upon Tom nan Tighearnan and was shown the Cairn of the Three Normans, the clouds which had overshadowed the corrie earlier in the day had lifted and the sun shone down upon the green grass and purple heather. South, beyond Glen Brittle, Rhum rose hazily, a grey cloud resting lightly upon its lower slopes. From each Cuillin peak in turn the mist rose, until at last it lingered only upon the rocky face of Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh.

Backwards and forwards across the grim rocks of Sgurr a' Mhadaidh a golden eagle soared, at times planing earthward at great speed, at times rising mightily into the blue. Above Sgurr Thuilm a pair of ravens circled, then alighted upon the cairn that marks the hill-top. Through a telescope they could be seen to hop sedately round one another.

[1] See p. 46.

After a while two climbers were noticed approaching the summit of Sgurr Thuilm by its ridge, and, sensing their approach, the ravens rose into the sunlit air and soared in spirals around the human intruders. The two hillmen, exhausted, threw their *rucksacks* upon the ground, then lay beside them.

Far up the slopes of Sgurr a' Mhadaidh a waterfall could be seen as a thin white line. It fell a certain distance, then was lost among the stones and boulders, and reached the lower ground unseen and unheard. From Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh the mist at last lifted, and its rain-harried rocks glistened as the August sun shone upon them. Nearer to Coire na Criche, and dwarfed by its huge neighbours, rose a shapely peak, Sgurr Feadan, or the Chanter Peak. At the foot of Sgurr Feadan is the small Cave of the Arrows. It receives its name because of a vein of flint from which, tradition has it, arrow-heads were fashioned. We may infer, therefore, that this small and now almost unknown cave furnished some at least of the arrow-heads used at the historic fight at Coire na Criche.



TALLISKER OF THE ROCKS

"Tallisker is the place beyond all that I have seen from which the gay and the jovial seem utterly excluded, and where the hermit might expect to grow old in meditation, without possibility of disturbance or interruption."—Dr Samuel Johnson, 1773.

IN all the Isle of Skye there are few places more remote than Tallisker. The old house stands beside the Atlantic, and north and south great precipices rise where yeasty torrents fall mightily from their birthplace among the mists to the thundering seas a thousand feet below.

Many persons of note have enjoyed the hospitality of Tallisker. Johnson and Boswell passed two nights within its walls, and Pennant rowed upon its broad bay. From Tallisker Sir Alexander MacDonald of the Isles wrote, in 1745, his historical letter to Duncan Forbes of Culloden, Lord President of the Council, as follows:—

My Lord,—Probably you'll have heard, before this reaches you, that some of our neighbours of the mainland have been mad enough to arm and join the young Adventurer mentioned in MacLeod's letter to you. Your lordship will find our conduct with regard to this unhappy scrape such as you'd wish, and such as the friendship you have always showed us will prompt to direct.

Young Clanranald is deluded, notwithstanding his assurances to us lately; and, what is more astonishing, Lochiel's prudence has quite forsaken him. You know too much of Glengarry not to know that he'd easily be led to be of the Party; but, as far as I can learn, he has not lately been with them. Mr MacLean of Coll is here with his daughter, lately married to Tallisker, and he assures me of his own wisdom; and, as he has mostly the direction of that Clan, promises as much as in him lies to prevent their being led astray. You may believe, my lord, our spirits are in a good deal of agitation, and that we are much at a loss how to behave in so extraordinary an occurrence. That we will have no connection with these madmen is certain, but we are bewildered in every other respect till we hear from you. Whenever these rash men meet with a check it's more than probable they'll endeavour to retire to their islands; how we ought to behave in that event we expect to know from your lordship. Their force, even in that case, must be very considerable to be repelled with batons; and we have no other arms in any quantities. I pledge MacLeod in writing for him and myself. I now come to tell you, what you surely

know, that I am most faithfully, my lord, your most obedient humble servant,

TALLISKER, 11*th August* 1745. ALEX. MACDONALD.

Pennant, writing about 1790, tells us that "Talyskir belongs to the chief of MacLeod, and in old times was always the portion of a second son; he enjoyed it for life, with the view of giving him the means of educating his children, who after that were left to the care of fortune."

Some of the MacLeods of Tallisker were famous in Highland history. They were otherwise known as the MacLeods of Minginish. Sir Roderick MacLeod of Tallisker, second son of Rorie Mór and nephew of the leader of the clan at the Battle of Beinn a' Chuillin, which is mentioned in the preceding chapter, commanded the MacLeods, a thousand strong, at the Battle of Worcester in 1651. With him on that memorable occasion was his brother, Sir Norman of Bernera. After the Restoration both were knighted by Charles the Second, and in those days the honour of knighthood was great.

At the Battle of Worcester the MacLeods fought most gallantly. They were decimated, and very few of them returned to the west. The clan has always pleaded that the sacrifice made there for Charles the Second more or less exempted them from further service in the cause of the Stuarts. It is, perhaps, not generally known that in 1745 the MacLeods fought against Prince Charles Edward.

It is interesting to record that at the time of the Battle of Worcester Sir Roderick of Tallisker was acting chief, as his elder brother John had died, and John's son was a minor.

Sir Roderick during his nephew's minority was curator and factor besides being the leader of the clan.

The MacLeods of Tallisker are now but a name in the Isle of Skye. The present representative of the branch lives in Tasmania, whither the family migrated in 1820, but will be (so far as can be foreseen) the next chief of MacLeod.

Although the old family have left it, the House of Tallisker is now occupied by a worthy successor—one who has much lore of the old times and lives among the great authors of the past.

There are few persons, even among those whose home is in Skye of the Mists, who have crossed Gleann fo Rathad (the Glen Below the Road) and have seen Tallisker amid its sheltering trees nestling below them, but all who have made that journey must have succumbed beneath the spell of Preshal Mór.

No lofty peak is Preshal. Its summit rises almost exactly 1000 feet above Atlantic waters, yet in all Skye there is no more shapely hill. Preshal looks upon Tallisker as its special care, guarding the old plane tree, beneath which Johnson sat, from those easterly storms that lift the water in spindrift from the hill lochs, and sheltering the garden where roses bloom in December, and a blue hydrangea opens a crown of pale blooms to the shortest day of winter.

On a grey winter's morning my host of Tallisker guided me, by way of Glen Sleadale, to Preshal Mór. At sunrise the frost had lifted, and for a brief moment the slow-climbing sun had tinged the snow-cap on Hecla of Uist across the sea with a delicate primrose glow. Now, as we mounted, the clouds overspread the sky, and pale

showers were forming over land and sea. The "deer's-hair" grass, rough and wiry, was the rich brown colour of *crotal* cloth, but beside the clear hill springs the close-cropped grass remained green as in summer.

On a small plateau, almost at the hill-top, we came, unexpectedly, upon the remains of three small dwellings. They were, apparently, the ruins of summer shielings. Surely they were of a race of poets or artists who chose to make their summer home thus high—on the roof of the world, yet sheltered from the winds by a smooth wall of rock, above and below? On a summer evening, when the cows had been milked and the day's work ended, these hill dwellers perhaps gathered beside their small doors and saw the sun sink in a cloud of glory, mystic, wonderful, behind Eaval of Uist. Beyond Rhum, luminous in glowing haze, they saw Beinn Hynish on the distant Isle of Tiree, where, according to tradition, the monks of Iona grew their barley. And on days of outstanding clearness they viewed the cone of Hirt [1] rising faint across ninety miles of ocean, where the galleys of MacLeod and MacDonald so often steered their imperious course.

Could one recapture the past one might listen to old tales of far-off days—told beside a peat fire that cooled neither by day nor by night from the morning of the procession to the summer shielings, at the first glory of summer, to the day of autumn and of sounding winds, when the doors were closed for the last time as the people with their sheep and cattle set out for the glen below.

Now there is none living who can tell of the summer shielings of Tallisker, yet hill, sea, and island remain

[1] St Kilda.

unchanged, and the shieling dwellers must sometimes have seen the dark spires of the Cuillin free themselves from mist as they did this winter's day. From billowy clouds, light as cotton wool, first one then another hill-top thrust itself. Upon each the snow was almost unbroken, but the Inaccessible Pinnacle upon Sgurr Dearg rose black as night against the grey of a winter sky. Mist held all the lesser hills. Then, as we watched, the clouds lifted, until at last even the Inaccessible Pinnacle was blotted out by that rising aerial tide.

How pleasing by contrast was the garden of Tallisker, where, 1000 feet beneath us, roses and chrysanthemums mingled their blooms.

Beyond the garden, and near the shore of Tallisker Bay, a line of browned and withered leaves of the yellow iris marked the site of Cuchulainn's Well. Perhaps Cuchulainn, illustrious Knight of the Red Branch of Ulster, slaked his thirst here one day when on passage in his *birlinn* to Dunscaith, in Sleat, where Queen Sgàthach instructed him in the arts of war.

One of the MacLeods of Tallisker (tradition does not say which) would drink of no water save from Cuchulainn's Well. Each night Donald his servant was sent with a bucket to bring back water from the well. One wild evening, in order to save himself a dark and difficult walk, old Donald filled his bucket at the burn which flows past the house, and trusted that this deceit might be undetected. On tasting the water the laird became instantly suspicious. Surely this was not the water from his beloved well! Donald was called in and closely questioned, but would not admit his misdeed. At last Tallisker said to him,

"You will fill your bucket again, Donald, and this time I will come to the well with you. And then by the taste of this water I shall know whether that first bucketful was from Cuchulainn's Well." Full of foreboding, Donald accompanied his master into the wild night and heard the wind and rain make music among the cliffs. At last they reached the well, almost invisible in the gloom, and Tallisker watched carefully while Donald filled the bucket. As they battled homeward against the storm, crafty Donald devised a scheme to save himself from his master's anger. On reaching the plank which spanned the burn he politely gave way to Tallisker, who crossed before him. Then Donald quickly spilled his bucket and refilled it from the burn, while his master unsuspectingly walked on ahead. Tallisker, on drinking the water and finding it again as distasteful to him as before, is reported to have exclaimed that Cuchulainn's Well must have been bewitched!

No doubt in olden times the lairds of Tallisker were proud to conduct their guests to the summit of Preshal Mór, although the hills then did not attract as they do now, and the higher peaks were looked upon with mistrust.

Boswell ascended Preshal. He writes: "After dinner he (Coll) and I walked to the top of Prieshwell,[1] a very high rocky hill, whence there is a view of Barra, the Long Island, Bernera, the Loch of Dunvegan, part of Rhum, part of Raasay, and a vast deal of the Isle of Skye."

Seaward of Preshal Mór stands Preshal Beag. Although it is the Little Preshal it is actually a few feet higher than Preshal Mór, but is less imposing. It stands more than a thousand feet above the sea, yet a whirlwind, during the

[1] Pennant, be it noted, writes of the hill as Briis-mhawl.

memorable gale of January 1927, actually deposited seaweed upon its crown!

Dr Samuel Johnson saw Tallisker at the sombre season of late summer, but it is not always a place from which "the gay and the jovial seem utterly excluded." In April the clouds that drift on the dun wind from the Atlantic are less thick than in autumn, when the learned Doctor saw Skye. Sooner or later the sun shines out, and if the sun follows swiftly upon the rain, the many waterfalls which throw themselves impetuously over the grim sea-cliffs are a source of continuous joy to the admiring eye.

Beneath the waterfalls the waves break. Purple sandpipers feed at low tide upon the rocks. In a few weeks they will fly north to Greenland or Spitzbergen, where they nest on the low tundra. Now they are so tame that, by walking slowly, it is possible to approach to a distance of a few feet from them as they feed where clusters of limpets cling, in orderly ranks, to the smooth black rocks. Where the sea-cliffs lean toward the strengthening sun there is already a profusion of spring flowers, and the scent of fields of primroses mingles with the tang of the seaweed. In little pockets on the bare rock the buds of the sea thrift are a deep, glorious crimson. In damp niches the golden flower-heads of the rose root have already appeared, and the crimson *lychnis* mingles with the yellow carpet of primroses. On grassy slopes, between the cliff-foot and the tide, are fields of white blossom of the scurvy grass, whose small flowers smell no less sweet than the primroses themselves. Thirty-five miles across the sea the Outer Hebrides rise.

April weather is nowhere more fickle than in the Isle of Skye. The morning at Tallisker is one of uninterrupted

Looking South-west to Rhum, from the summit of Blaven

sunshine. The hills are clear, the sea is blue and serene. But at noon showers begin to fall upon the Hebrid Isles across the Minch. In a long chain they form. One veils the hills of South Uist; another drenches the sister isle of Barra; a third descends upon Rhum, and causes the mist to drop low on its hills. Idly, before the breeze, the grey showers drift.

Let us climb to Biod Ruadh, where the rock falls sheer to the Minch a thousand feet beneath, and, while yet the sun shines warm and Tallisker is free of showers, feast upon the vision of sea, hill, and isle. Far beneath us a small flock of kittiwakes are flying north a few feet above the sea. They may be steering for Shetland, or for the Scandinavian coast, perhaps even for some icy headland of Spitzbergen, 1500 miles to the north. So early in the season there are few solans above Tallisker waters. The sea is cold: mackerel and herring are not yet showing in-shore, and thus the solan must hunt the seas out of sight of land.

On a grassy ledge of the precipice is the ancient eyrie of a sea-eagle. Its owners have gone; indeed, there is not one pair of these birds nesting in Britain at the present day. The sea-eagle has shared the fate of the osprey and other of our rare birds. As we watch, a buzzard sails out over the rock. A pair of ravens have their nest near. They hate the buzzard, and when they see him they swoop angrily at him. Repeatedly they attack, one after the other. The buzzard becomes bewildered. He is forced gradually down, down, into the abyss. A thousand feet below the attacks continue. It is hard to see what is happening, but it seems as if the buzzard must be forced at length upon the water, whence he would have difficulty in rising.

Above the highest part of the black merciless cliff a flood of joyous music is heard against the freshening sea breeze. The singer is a skylark, and he is seen as a black speck poised at a great height. He is singing, not over the land, but above the sea, and as he floats over the gulf mingles his song with the roar of the surf. Far beneath the songster greater black-backed gulls pass and repass. These sinister gulls often prey upon skylarks, but are unaware, or perhaps heedless, of the small songster floating so far above them.

Skylark and raven, solan, buzzard, kittiwake, and black-backed gull—these form a strange bird company beside Tallisker of the Rocks, but one and all they greet the April sun with gladness.

Earlier in this chapter I have said that the way to Tallisker lies through the Glen Beneath the Road. From Carbost, which may be said to be the port of Tallisker, the distance is four miles, and the walk, in winter as in spring or in summer, is one of delightful contrasts. One November day the sky brightened after a morning of rain and twilight, and when I started on my walk from Tallisker to Carbost the Minch lay at rest below me. It was calm as some sheltered pool, and upon its green waters were russet pathways from reflected clouds.

A few minutes before sunset I reached the head of the glen. The Cuillin giants during the day had been hidden in close mist, but gradually and very wonderfully the clouds now began to lift. Sgurr Thuilm first stood revealed. Close above, and around, that peak a layer of thin cloud floated motionless. It glowed with pink fires in the sinking sun—radiant and of remarkable beauty. Sgurr Dearg next freed itself, and the snows upon its lonely summit

Looking across from Talisker to Rhum

became tinged with purple. Very slowly Sgurr na Banachdich threw off its mantle of mist, and, last of all, Bruach na Frìthe showed violet-tinted snows through a window of its overshadowing cloud. In the deep blue sky overhead small sapphire clouds floated; westward they gradually changed to rose colour, then all at once dimmed their borrowed light as the sun left them.

About this time appeared in the evening sky the crafty clan of the *fitheach*, or raven. From Carbost, from the heights above Sligachan, from the shores of Raasay, they came. They flew in twos, in threes, sometimes singly, winging their way homewards to the great precipices of Biod Ruadh, where they roost. As the black-plumaged travellers passed overhead they croaked from time to time hoarsely. As dusk settled upon hill and glen the last stragglers of that winged company passed me. They hurried west before the light should fail them, their sable wings with quick, powerful thrusts urging them forward. Once angry cries drifted down the still air, and a raven could be seen in fierce pursuit of a grey crow which had approached him too closely for his dignity.

It was inspiring to see the strong, purposeful flight of those ravens, and I recalled the old Gaelic saying: "If a raven should accompany you or precede you on an expedition, and if he should be joyous, your journey will be prosperous. If it is to the left that he goes, and croaks at you in front, it is at a coward that he croaks in that manner, or his croaking denotes disgrace to some of the party."

That evening I looked down upon Tallisker as the last of the sunset disappeared behind South Uist across the Minch. Hecla and Beinn Mhor were so hazy as to be

scarcely visible, but behind those faint hills towered the image of a gigantic isle, in shape not unlike Rhum. Perhaps the night clouds had taken on the form of an island: perhaps I Breasail, the abode of the spirit, had become visible for a few moments to mortal eyes. The memory of that phantom isle will remain because of its size and the beauty of its form as it brooded benignly above the darkening Minch.

While still the afterglow lingered the stars shone out, and a swift-moving meteor threw a silver streak across the silent heavens. Then, from immediately beneath the dim, sea-girt cone of Hecla, came the clear welcome rays of the Uisinish light. Behind me, as I walked, was Jupiter; ahead of me was the Uisinish beacon, and there was little to choose between them in brilliance. But the rays of the lighthouse rhythmically waxed and waned: the lamp of Jupiter burned with strong and steady glow. Thus, without wind and almost without cloud, came the end of the short winter's day in the country of Tallisker of the Rocks.

But it is rare, at the season of winter, for calm weather to linger beside Atlantic tides, and a morning soon dawned when a fierce southerly gale rushed in upon the Tallisker rocks. Ruman, he who in old writings has been called the Homer of the Gaels, a thousand years ago wrote of the south wind "setting in across the land of Saxons of the mighty shields." It would have inspired that poet of the royal blood to have seen the gale urging the great waves over the bay of Tallisker, seething with foam. As each wave reluctantly receded from the shore, the rounded stones which it sucked back with it rolled with the roar of distant thunder. In the fierce, sudden squalls the creamy foam

was caught up like driven snow upon the gale. Purple sandpipers and turnstones, flying with difficulty, were at the mercy of the storm. As the squalls struck them they were swept almost vertically into the air, and the pale sun for an instant gleamed upon their moist plumage.

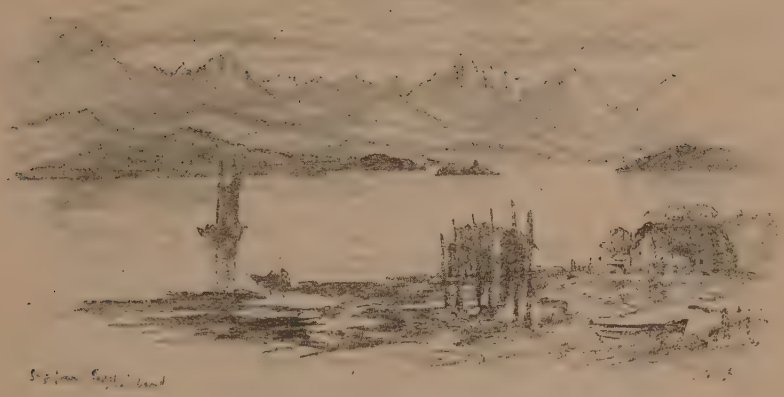
Boswell, in the narrative of his wanderings in Skye with Samuel Johnson, tells us that at Tallisker he "looked at no less than fifteen different waterfalls near the house in the space of about a quarter of an hour." In a winter storm these waterfalls are a wonderful feature of this stern coast. Above the north shore of Tallisker Bay a considerable stream of water falls in a gleaming cascade to the sea, a full five hundred feet below. On this day of southerly storm the strength of the wind was such that the falling water was caught on the arms of the gale and swept back over the hill slope above the cliff in a cloud of grey spray. Now and again, as between the squalls the gale lessened in violence, the waterfall reached the sea. But even then the wind-torn spray, harried relentlessly, swayed, now this way now that, like some living protesting thing. From time to time the low winter sun shone out from behind the flying wrack, and then a splendid rainbow hung, halo-like, above the fall. Lesser waterfalls in the vicinity offered no resistance to the gale. They were swept upwards and backwards with such ease that they gave the illusion of chimneys smoking furiously in a strong wind.

At the south entrance to Tallisker Bay is an isolated rock that rises like some sentinel from the waters. Its old name, mentioned by Pennant, is Stac an Fhucadair, which in English is the Stack of the Fuller of Cloth. This is the "pyramidal and reclining" rock round which Pennant was

rowed one hundred and fifty years ago, to the accompaniment of an *iorram*, or Gaelic song, sung to the rhythm of the oars.

Stac an Fhucadair is exposed to the unbridled fury of a southerly storm, and to-day the great waves beat upon it with violence, sending the spray far up its streaming sides.

Above the deep chords of the sea music the shrill cry of a soaring buzzard was heard at dusk. On the western horizon the sky burned dully, and a quick-moving storm brought darkness before her time. A flash of lightning flickered above the sea, and thunder shook the cliffs, peal upon peal in quick succession, while torrential rain aslant the gale drove across the sullen sea like a sheet of solid water. There was wild music above Tallisker Bay this winter night. The music of the thunder, of the restless waves, of the swaying waterfalls, of the rushing wind mingled their chords, and the spirit of the tempest was abroad upon Eilean a' Cheò, the Isle of Mist.



MACLEOD'S MAIDENS

OFF the coast of Duthaich Mhic Leoid (MacLeod's Country) three rocks, dark, high, and slender, rise from the floor of the Atlantic.

Their home is a wild part of the coast of the Wingèd Isle, at the northern entrance to Loch Bracadale, that was known to the Norsemen as Vestrafjord, or Wester Fjord, of old. Here the south-westerly seas roll in, unfettered, from the ocean, and the tide, either at the ebb or at the flood, flows swiftly past the smooth-worn flanks of these great rock pillars.

The Mother, as the largest of the three stacks is called, has now but two daughters. When, in 1824, MacCulloch published his celebrated letters, addressed to Sir Walter Scott, on the Highlands and Western Isles of Scotland, he mentioned that in his day there were only three stacks, but there is a tradition that a fourth column at one time existed, and that it was snapped cleanly across by the fury of the waves during a great storm. That tradition is doubtless well founded, for the flat base of the fourth

column may still be seen, awash, as the swell rolls over it in foam. The mother of the Maidens (so 'tis said) is constantly engaged in weaving a web of cloth which one of the daughters is occupied in fulling or waulking.

Loch Bracadale is now a lonely place, but in the autumn of 1263 MacLeod's Maidens looked out upon a stirring scene. They saw, limping into Loch Bracadale, the magnificent fleet of King Haco of Norway, battered and in sorry plight after the Battle of Largs. The ships anchored, food supplies were requisitioned from the people round, and then, as silently as it had arrived, the fleet set sail northward towards Norway.

Perhaps the Maidens also saw Clanranald's galleys cross from South Uist to Skye on a Sabbath day of the year 1580. That was a black day for the people of MacLeod's Country, for the men of Clanranald, setting fire to the little church of Trumpan, in Vaternish, during the service, destroyed each man, woman, and child.[1]

Following that callous deed the name of Clanranald was for long accursed in the Country of MacLeod.

One woman, who had lost her three sons in the fight which followed the burning of the church, set a malison upon the men of South Uist: she wished them ill fortune the next time they should come upon a harrying expedition.

The curse, in Gaelic, is as follows. It was kindly given me by Mr John MacKenzie, MacLeod's Factor :

Durachd Mhic Leoid ri
Clann Raghnaill
Air an ath—thurus a thig iad a thogail
Creiche.

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[1] See p. 144.

Gaoth an iar dheas
Chon na Feisdidh
Le ceò 's uisge
Clann Raghnaill
Air bordaibh briste
(Leam cha mhisde)
Ann an eathar caol, corrach
Seol ard, binneach;
Luchd de chomanna falaimhe
Taoim gu tobhtaichean
Sgioba fann frithearra
Is gun urram fir do a cheile.

In English it reads:

The Malediction of the MacLeod Woman
On the Men of
Clanranald
The next time they should come upon a
Harrying expedition.

A south-west wind towards the Neist
With mist and rain
Clanranald
On broken plankings
(Not with me any sorrow them to see)
In a slender, cockle-like boat
The sail high, light-headed,
Those in it stricken with emptiness
Bilge water to the thwarts
The crew weak with wrangling
Each man one to another
Without respect.

Some of the old people believed that the woman who uttered the curse had in her mind the dreaded MacLeod's Maidens when she spoke her malediction, wishing that Clanranald's galleys might be splintered against their unyielding sides. But at an earlier time by far a galley met destruction on the Maidens. It was in the fourteenth century that the Lady of Macleod and her daughters, when

the chief had been mortally wounded in Harris, attempted to sail his galley to Skye, and perished in the attempt.

Of a winter's day the wanderer in MacLeod's Country can lie at the edge of the great sea-cliff, at the entrance to Loch Bracadale, and hear the music of the south-west wind mingle with the solemn roar of the thunderous, slow-moving surf as it sweeps the dark skirts of the Maidens. On the distant Cuillin hurrying clouds rest lightly. From time to time the snowy spire of Sgurr nan Gillean frees itself, gleams for a few moments, then once again is swallowed up in the eager clouds.

Deep blue, the heaving Atlantic stretches away westward. Golden windows of light show on the western horizon as the short winter's afternoon draws to a close. Here and there upon the sea pools of pale sunlight lie. Above the rock-face buzzards hang upon the breeze. Showers of stinging rain drift in from the ocean. They drench the land and the brown hill grasses, then pass on eastwards, and at their passing the hills of South Uist rise blue from the western horizon.

But how different is the scene on a day of early summer. Beneath a blue sky Loch Bracadale lies asleep. Above its sunlit waters the clan of the sea-swallows steer for their fishing grounds. Their flight is daintiness itself. So delicate are these birds that it is hard to realise they were, a few weeks earlier, hovering above the waters of tropical seas.

The shapely summits of MacLeod's Tables rise to the north. Alasdair *Crottach*, chief of MacLeod in the sixteenth century, was once the guest of King James V of Scotland at Holyrood. One of the King's suite said to the chief, "You in your highland country can show us no table so large, nor candle sconces so magnificent, as those you see before you." MacLeod replied that if His Majesty

would honour him with a visit to Dunvegan he would show him and his nobles all these things in greater splendour. The opportunity in time arose. MacLeod led his distinguished guests to the larger of the flat-topped hills which rise beside Dunvegan. They arrived upon the summit plateau after sunset and saw several hundred clansmen, each holding a flaming torch of pine in his hands, and a sumptuous repast of good things spread out upon the flat hill-top. "Here," said the chief, "is my table, and I feel sure that nowhere else can so large and magnificent a table be found, and here are my candlesticks, your Majesty's faithful servants." Alasdair had made good his boast.

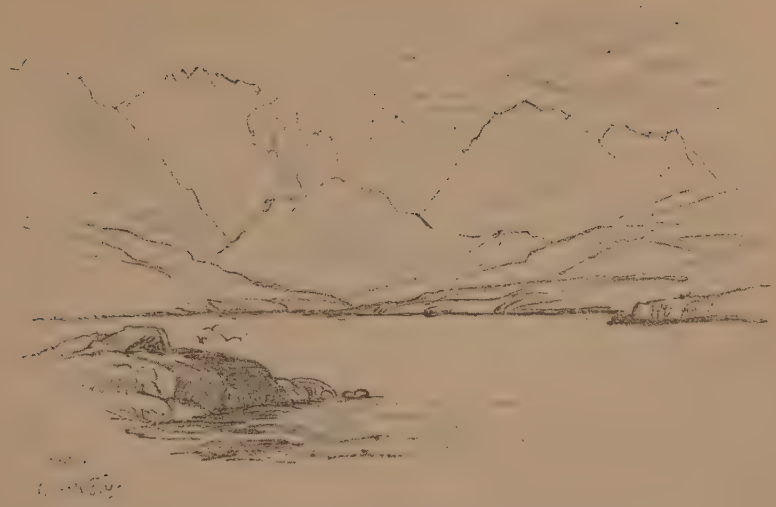
Faintly pencilled on the far horizon are the hills of Uist —Hecla, Beinn Mhor, Corodale of the Cave. To the south the Cuillin rise. A small cloud rests upon the very summit of Sgurr Dearg; in the corries of Bruach na Frìthe snow-fields gleam. Upon the skerries of the isles of Bracadale a fleeting gleam of white shows from time to time as the slumbering Atlantic swell gently flows across some half-submerged rock. Upon Wiay, largest of these isles, the grass is green, and in the crannies of the rocks primroses and wild hyacinths blossom together. On the broad crown of Wiay lie small lochs, secluded and sheltered. Here mallard drakes collect in bachelor parties while their mates tend the young broods, and among the uncurling fronds of the hartshorn fern the eider duck broods those large glossy eggs which are warmed by a liberal lining of soft down from her breast. Beneath Wiay a herring drifter lies at anchor. She has returned from a night of unsuccessful fishing off Rhum. Sunset will see her again steering westward bound, perhaps for Uisinish of Uist, where the

herring shoals are often found, or perhaps for the distant Isle of Tiree. Her crew are below, resting awhile from their labours; on the shore her nets are drying in the sun.

From the sea MacLeod's Maidens are always magnificent. On the day when I approached them by water the ocean was so calm that no swell broke at their feet. But even on this brightest of summer mornings the Maidens were dark—dark as the plumage of the shag that rested upon one of them, and was driven from its perch by a greater black-backed gull.

Near the Maidens are a number of splendid sea caves. Into one of them we rowed. The entrance was narrow, but the water so deep that the floor of the ocean was invisible. The vault of the cave was a wide and graceful arch, smooth and symmetrical. Drops of clear water dripped slowly from it. Rocky terraces rose from the opaque depths. They were tenanted by a great company of shags. As our boat entered the cave these birds filled the air with grunting cries of anger. Never were intruders less welcome! The shags opened wide their bills, hissing and shrieking at us. Some of them in terror literally hurled themselves into the water. They fell with a great splash, then submerged instantly and were not seen again.

At the entrance to the cave the sunlight sparkled upon the sea. The Maidens, close at hand, towered into the blue sky. Dark and massive, they awaited the passing of the fine weather and the thunderous surf that surely arrived upon the mist-laden wind from the west. Then they watched undismayed the great seas that broke angrily upon them, and the spray that drifted in grey clouds over the rocky headland and far across the heather and swaying bracken of MacLeod's Country.



HEREDITARY PIPERS OF SKYE

The world may come to an end,
But love and music can never die.—(Gaelic rune.)

THE Highland bagpipe, or *piob mhor* (great pipe), is a musical instrument of great antiquity and has been the national instrument of Scotland for over two hundred years.

About the year 1700 the harp was superseded by the pipe. For several generations previous to that time the harp or *clarsach* and the pipe were played, figuratively speaking, side by side in the castles of the great Highland chiefs. The harp was the instrument of peace. The music of the pipe, being more robust, could be played in war and in peace. After the middle of the eighteenth century the harp was rarely heard, but of recent years its playing has been revived, and there is no music that suits the old Gaelic songs so well.

It is probable that the decline of the *clarsach* was due to

the gradual disappearance of the bard who sang his own verse. The chiefs in the eighteenth century were spending much time away from the Highlands. They lived for a part of each year in London or abroad, and were absorbing the customs of the English. They were thus less interested in their hereditary harpers, and the two arts of harpist and rhapsodist were lost together, and from the same cause.

The chiefs of all the great Highland clans were surrounded in former times by their hereditary office-bearers. They had hereditary doctors, armourers, purse-bearers, archers, bards, harpers, and pipers. Of pipers, the most celebrated line in Skye, and indeed in all Scotland, were the MacCrimmons. They were pipers to the chiefs of MacLeod, and owed their pre-eminence to the beauty of their compositions and their skill in teaching. At Boreraig, beside Loch Follart at Dunvegan, the MacCrimmons had their college of piping, and to this college came all the best pipers in Scotland, and even from Erin across the sea.

There are various traditions concerning the origin of this musical family. They are supposed to be descended from the Druids and to be of a royal Irish line. One of the Irish kings was Crimthan, and there are scholars of to-day who believe that the MacCrimmons were descended from that king. There is a popular tradition (which finds no favour with those skilled in Celtic lore) that the first of the MacCrimmons was brought from Italy to Skye by the MacLeod of the day on his return from a crusade in the reign of King Alexander of Scotland, and that the name MacCrimmon is derived from Cremona, in Italy, the piper's birthplace. This tradition was current over forty years ago on the remote island of St Kilda, where no English is

spoken. It is known that the family were anciently established in the Isles, for in the Bannatyne MS. it is stated that in the thirteenth century "the south end and the small isles of Harris were possessed by the MacCrimmons, afterwards the famous hereditary pipers of the MacLeods." The Bannatyne MS. also mentions that, *circa* 1250, "Sleat had previously belonged to the Clan Mhic Gurimen, a Celtic tribe." It may possibly be that Gurimen was an early spelling of Crimmon.[1]

It was perhaps in the seventeenth century that the most renowned MacCrimmon composers lived. At this time *ceòl mór* alone was played by the great pipers. *Ceòl mór*, or "big music," is the classical music of the Highland pipe. Each composition of *ceòl mór* is nowadays known as a *pìobaireachd* (Anglicè, pibroch). A *pìobaireachd* is built upon a theme or *urlar*. After the *urlar* has been played, one variation after another follows, and the composition usually ends with the fast and difficult movements known as the *crunluadh* and *crunluadh amach*.

There is a general impression—perhaps because of the slow rhythmic movements of classical pipe music—that a *pìobaireachd* is always a lament. This is not so. It may be a lament, it is true, but it may also be a "warning" ("Hector MacLean's Warning"), a battle piece ("The Desperate Battle"), a salute ("Lady Margaret MacDonald's Salute"), a "gathering" tune ("Tulloch Ard"), a tune to keep rowers of a galley together ("MacLeod of MacLeod's Rowing Pîobaireachd"), a satire ("A Taunt on MacLeod"), a hymn of praise ("Moladh Mhairi"), or a march ("The Earl of

[1] The Bannatyne MS. has been preserved in the Glendale branch of the MacLeod family.

Ross's March"). It is probable that every *pìobaireachd* originally had its own words to which it could be sung. The words of most of the old tunes have now been lost, but some remain, and a short time ago, on looking through an old book of Gaelic poems (*Dain agus Orain*, 1780), I saw the complete words to a long and very beautiful *pìobaireachd* known as "Guileagag Móraig" ("Marion's Swan-song").

In the days of the MacCrimmons it is doubtful whether there was staff notation in pipe music, and all the compositions of *ceòl mór* were handed down from one generation to another by a "word" notation called *canntaireachd*, which was sung by the old masters as they taught their pupils. At the MacCrimmon college at Boreraig each pupil had to memorise one hundred and ninety-five testing compositions of *ceòl mór* and be a master of theory and composition before he was held to have honourably finished his musical course. Little wonder that there was a saying that it took seven generations of pipers to make a master player.

No piper was considered to have finished the course at Boreraig until he had studied there for at least seven years. At the present time piping is not taken so seriously, and there are few Highland families who have in their service a really good player. Nor is the spirit of the present day in favour of *ceòl mór*, and with the passing of the old times its composition has almost died out. During the past century very few outstanding *pìobaireachd* tunes have been composed, and not one has been written during the last fifty years.

The present restless spirit of the times is more favourable to the lighter pipe music (march, strathspey, and reel),

and it is probable that never before has the standard of this type of music—sometimes called *ceòl beag*, or little music—been so high. *Ceòl beag* found no favour with the old chiefs and their pipers, and it is said that the Laird of Coll, returning unexpectedly to his castle and hearing his piper secretly practising a march tune, there and then dismissed him from his service.

Many beautiful pieces of *ceòl mór* have been preserved to us; many more have been lost. After the Battle of Culloden, in 1746, the Disarming Act was put into force throughout the Highlands, and in the early days of that Act it was often as much as a man's life was worth to be convicted of being a piper.

That so many pieces of *ceòl mór* have been preserved is due largely to Donald MacDonald, a native of Glen Hinisdale, in Skye, who, in 1805, published what is probably the earliest collection of *ceòl mór* in existence. Then, in 1839, Angus MacKay[1] published his more extensive collection of classical pipe music; and, in 1900, the late Major-General Thomason brought out a small book called *Ceòl Mór*, in which is published, in a new and easily acquired shorthand notation, some two hundred and eighty *pìobaireachd* tunes. This little book is now rare; it is sometimes known as "the piper's Bible," and is of priceless value to all who play classical pipe music.

So far as we can tell, the MacCrimmons excelled all

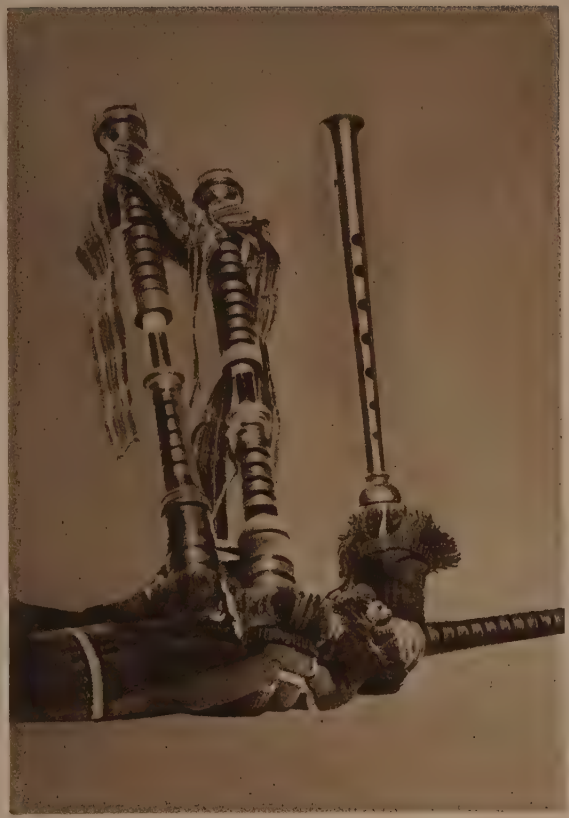
[1] Angus MacKay was one of four gifted sons of John MacKay, a latter-day pupil of the MacCrimmons. John MacKay was a native of Raasay, who lived for a time at Kyleakin and taught numerous pupils who afterwards excelled in their profession. It is from John MacKay, through his pupils, his sons, and his sons' pupils that the MacCrimmon traditional playing has been handed down to the leading pipers of to-day.

other pipers in the art of *pìobaireachd* composition. Some of their masterpieces are immortal. One of the finest is "Cumha na Cloinne," the Lament for the Children, composed by Padruig Mór MacCrimmon, who lived in the seventeenth century. Padruig Mór had eight fine sons. One day a foreign ship dropped anchor in Loch Dunvegan. She had a deadly fever aboard of her and spread it far and wide over MacLeod's Country. Padruig Mór lost all his sons but one of this fever, and, under the stress of deep emotion, composed his lament for his loved family.

The first MacCrimmon of whom we have record is Iain Odhar; the last of his line to hold office was Iain Dubh (Black John), who died rather more than a hundred years ago. His son in 1840 held the rank of captain in the British army. Iain Dubh was over ninety years of age when he died. The Rev. Dr Niall Ross of Glen Dale tells me that his grandmother knew the old man, and that up to the last, when too frail to play, he used to sit by the fire and finger his stick as though it had been his beloved chanter. According to the Bannatyne MS., it was Alasdair *Crottach* (chief of MacLeod from 1480 to 1540) who gave the MacCrimmons their Boreraig lands. In an old document it is mentioned that in 1528 there resided at Boreraig one John MacAngus, who was, we may infer, MacCrimmon's predecessor.

Perhaps the most celebrated MacCrimmon (as a man, if not as a piper) was Fionnlaidh na Plaide Baine. He was known as Finlay of the White Plaid because he was always dressed in white homespun.[1] He first became famous by routing, single-handed, a body of twelve bullying men who

[1] *The MacLeods of Dunvegan*, by R. C. MacLeod of MacLeod.



Bagpipe played by Iain Dubh, the last of the great MacCrimmons

Bagpipe supposed to have been played by Padraig Mòr MacCrimmon in the 17th century

were oppressing the people. Finlay bound with strong fishing-line those he did not kill, and took them captive to Dunvegan Castle. He also saved the MacLeods from a surprise attack by the MacDonalds of Clanranald on one occasion.

It was a dark, misty night and Finlay was fishing in Loch Dunvegan. He saw suddenly several hostile galleys loom through the mist. He and his four companions rowed for the shore at Galtrigil to give the alarm. He was pursued and overtaken as his boat grounded on the beach. His four companions were killed. Fionnlaidh escaped, and running to the very summit of Dunvegan Head, gave three mighty shouts which the watchman at Dunvegan Castle heard, although the castle is seven miles from the headland. The surprise attack of the Clanranalds was thus averted.

The MacCrimmons held, rent free, the lands of Boreraig and Galtrigil until the year 1770. By that year the value of the land had become six or seven times as great as it was when the MacCrimmons originally had been granted the farm, and so MacLeod reasonably proposed to resume one-half of the farm, at the same time offering to MacCrimmon a free lease of the other half *in perpetuum*. MacCrimmon, indignant that his emoluments should be curtailed, resigned the farm and broke up his establishment. The farm was afterwards let to eighteen different tenants, and brought in over £100 a year.

The MacCrimmons were well educated, and were persons of great importance. A MacCrimmon always had a *gille*, or servant, to carry his pipe. This explains the opening words of the beautiful *pìobaireachd*, "The Lament

for Rorie Mór." The lament begins with the following words: "Tog orm mo phiob," meaning "Lift my pipe upon me." No MacCrimmon lifted his bagpipe himself; this was the duty of his servant. It is an indication of the respect in which the MacCrimmons were held that the chief of MacLeod in 1708 gave MacCrimmon a "tocher" of £157 upon his marriage.

It is interesting to read in the *New Statistical Account of Scotland* (written about twenty years after the death of the last hereditary piper to MacLeod): "There are a few of the MacCrimmons still residing in the parish, but they were born of what was reckoned a very low marriage for MacCrimmon, and they do not possess either the talents or the respectability of their progenitors. A MacCrimmon still acts as piper to MacLeod, but he is not descended from the Boreraig MacCrimmons, who appear to have renounced their profession with their endowment."

Boreraig, beside the sea, has lost its glory. MacCrimmon's house is a ruin, but it can be seen that it was a dwelling of considerable proportions, with its byres and its outhouses surrounding it. Close to the ruin, and now built into a wall, is a great stone, in weight perhaps half a ton. It is known as Clach Mhor Mhic Cruimein, or the Great Stone of MacCrimmon. It is said to have been used by Padruig Mór MacCrimmon to drive his horse's tether-peg into the ground. None now living in MacLeod's Country can so much as move this great stone.

The following story told me in Boreraig testifies the strength of the MacCrimmons. One of the MacLeods, who was a general in the British army, was abroad fighting, and MacCrimmon was with him. When the army was on

the march a carriage passed. It neither stopped nor gave the soldiers sufficient room. This annoyed MacLeod, and he called on MacCrimmon to teach that driver his manners. They held the carriage wheels, and so great was the strength of the Highland chief and his piper, that the carriage wheels remained in their hands while the horses went on without them!

Near the MacCrimmons' former dwelling is a small recess in the rock beside the sea. It is Slochd nam Piobairean, the Pipers' Hollow. Here MacCrimmon's pupils practised over their tunes. As they fingered the chanter on the breezy hillside beside the shore they could see the Cuillin southward raise their blue ethereal spires to the sky. Did the musicians glance north they viewed the hills of Harris, fair to gaze upon, across the blue plain of the Minch. Below them they could hear the murmur of the waves. It may be that there lingers here the faint echo of the old pipe tunes that so often drifted across the hills and across the sea; it is a pleasant thought that they may yet make melody.

Near Slochd nam Piobairean is Uamh nan Piobairean, or the Pipers' Cave. To this cave the great MacCrimmons retired to compose. When they were desirous of making some outstanding composition they vowed a vow that they would touch no food until the *pìobaireachd* was completed. To MacCrimmon, fasting in his cave, there appeared by night the spirit of his ancestor. The spirit piper played him a wonderful tune. In the morning MacCrimmon found that he could imperfectly remember the tune. The second night his ancestor again appeared and played the tune to him. This time the human listener received it more clearly, and when the third night it was played a

third time MacCrimmon remembered it without fault. So much did he appreciate this tune that he called it his sweetheart, and to this day it is known as "MacCrimmon's Sweetheart."

Dunvegan Head, near Boreraig, is so delightful a spot that the MacCrimmons, we may doubt not, sometimes climbed it at sunset or by the light of the full moon for inspiration.

It is on an August day that Dunvegan Head is at its best. To the very edge of the great precipice of a thousand feet the heather blossoms so richly that the headland is purple and the breeze heavy with the scent of heather honey. It is inspiring to look across this carpet of bloom to the blue waters of the Minch, far below, and to see the hills of Uist beyond.

There are many great chasms on Dunvegan Head. Geodh an Tairbh (the Chasm of the Bull) and Geodha nan Each (the Chasm of the Horses) are close together. Then there is Geodh na Gliongraich (the Chasm of the Tinkling Sound), that may have been named because the pebbles here roll back musically with the receding waves at the foot of the gully.

As MacCrimmon sat, lost in thought, upon this lonely headland in the dusk of a summer night, he saw perchance a ruddy beacon lighted on the far western horizon. Beyond North Uist it shone, and he knew that it came from Eilean nam Manach (the Isle of the Monks), and that the monks were lighting their friendly beacon to warn passing ships of the many rocks which rise treacherously from the sea around that lonely island group.

Leum an Doill, the Blind Man's Leap, is at Boreraig. One of the pupils at the piping college was Iain *Dall* MacKay, the blind piper of Gairloch. His fellow-pupils

were jealous of his fine playing, and one day when he angered them in some manner they pursued him so hotly that the blind man leaped unknowingly from the top of a grassy knoll to the ground twenty feet below, yet was unharmed.

Although this happened centuries ago, the marks of where his heels landed in the soft grass were, so 'tis said, visible until recent times!

The piping college of the MacCrimmons was known as the Oil-Thigh. In the eighteenth century the MacCrimmons gave diplomas to their most successful pupils. On the diploma were drawn a picture of Dunvegan Castle, the galley of MacLeod, and various musical instruments. The name of the holder and the date of his entrance to, and departure from, the college were written on the diploma, which was sealed with the MacCrimmon seal. Among the last students at Boreraig were two of the MacIntyres of South Uist, hereditary pipers to Clanranald. Four cows were said to have been paid for their tuition.

The MacCrimmons have gone; their pipes remain. At Dunvegan Castle is preserved the renowned *piob bhreac*, or Speckled Pipe, said to have belonged to Padruig Mór MacCrimmon. The pipe has been re-made, and the tops of the three drones are all that is left of the original.

In Dunvegan Castle is another historical pipe. This pipe has the two small drones, but the big drone is wanting. It was played by Iain Dubh MacCrimmon, the last hereditary piper, and bears out the remarks of Joseph MacDonald[1] that the pipers of the west had in his time "laid aside the use of the great drone."

There are various legends to account for the unusual

[1] *A Compleat Theory of the Scots' Highland Bagpipe*, compiled 1760–63.

piping skill of the MacCrimmons. It is said that they possessed a fairy chanter. It was called Sionnsair Airgiod na Mna Sithe, the Silver Chanter of the Fairy Woman, and was gifted by a fairy to Iain Og in the Pipers' Hollow.

There is another account of the gift of music to the MacCrimmons. A great piping championship was to be held at Dunvegan. A young herd boy was anxious to hear all the fine playing, but his master would not allow him to go, for he said that his work was to herd cattle and not to listen to piping. The boy, sad at heart, was lying on the hill grass with the summer sun warm upon him and the scent of the wild thyme in his nostrils when a beautiful fairy appeared to him. She said, "Have you your pipe with you, lad?" He said that he had, and that if he had his way of it he would be down at Dunvegan listening to all the fine playing. The fairy said to him, "I will give you the choice of three gifts. Which will you have—the gift of sailing, so that your boat of spotted yew will cut a slender oaten straw, so fine your steering of her; or the might of battle, so that when you fight the ravens of the Dun will be satiated with blood; or the gift of piping, so that your music will bring the birds from the trees and give peace to wounded men and pain-worn women?" The lad looked shyly up at the fairy. She was beautiful with a wild beauty. Her eyes were large. In them he saw sorrow and the light of the spiritual world. She looked at him kindly but (he thought) a little sadly, and stood silent awaiting his reply. Her dress was "the pure colour of the green sea where it lies over white sand." The lad said, "Give me the gift of piping." She gave him a fairy chanter and the gift of piping, then faded from his view.

Picking up his pipes the lad hurried down to Dunvegan. The piping there was in full swing. Renowned players from every district of the Highlands were contesting in *ceòl mór*. MacLeod was angry when the herd boy arrived against his orders, and, as a punishment, insisted that he should play a tune before them all (knowing that he was but an indifferent player) so that he might be disgraced. The lad stood out with his pipe. He tuned his drones. The great players around him smiled to think that the boy was to compete against them. But as he played the talking and the ridicule were gradually stilled, and all listened eagerly. The lad was carried away by his tune. His music was such as had never before been heard, even at Dunvegan, and, as he finished amid breathless silence, all were agreed that the unknown herd boy had gained Buaidh na Pìobaireachd, the Championship of Piping.

The lad became the first MacCrimmon.

The fairy had told the boy that he and his heirs must always reverence the fairy chanter, and if ever anything were said by its owner against it she would at once recall her gift.

Centuries after that MacLeod and his kinsman, MacLeod of Raasay, were returning to Skye from Applecross in the Dunvegan galley. MacCrimmon was with them, and after a time MacLeod said to him, "Seid suas" ("Blow up"). MacCrimmon blew up his pipe. He sat on the prow, the piper's seat, and the sea was so rough that he could not keep his fingers on the chanter. At last, in anger, he threw down his pipe and began to abuse the chanter. Scarcely had he finished speaking when the chanter wrenched itself from the drones and leaped overboard into the waves.

Then MacCrimmon, too late, remembered the fairy prophecy that had been handed down in his family from father to son.

This is perhaps why the "Speckled Pipe" in Dunvegan Castle has a new chanter and old drones.

Less celebrated than the MacCrimmons were the MacArthurs, hereditary pipers to MacDonald of the Isles at the castle of Duntulm. The MacArthurs, or MacKarters, from time immemorial occupied the lands of Hunglader, in Trotternish, in virtue of their office. In 1773 these lands were valued at eighty-fours merks of silver duty. The site of the MacArthurs' house is now occupied by a crofter's dwelling, but the small hill where the pipers and their pupils almost daily practised their tunes is still pointed out. The hill is called Cnoc Phail, and it is in close vicinity to Peingowan at Kilmuir.

The *New Statistical Account of Scotland* tells us that "the MacArthurs vied with the MacCrimmons of Dunvegan, the MacGregors of Fortingall, the MacKays of Gairloch, the Rankins of Coll, and the MacIntyres of Rannoch."

On the Island of Ulva, beside Mull, was a celebrated college of piping presided over by MacArthurs, apparently members of the same family who held the lands of Hunglader.

One of the last of the MacArthurs was in favour, more than a century ago, of founding a piping college for the instruction of those whose services might be useful in Highland regiments. The scheme came to nothing, but MacArthur was a pioneer, and in recent years we have seen started and carried on successfully the school for army pipers at Edinburgh Castle, where selected players are

given a six months' course of tuition by the pipe-major instructor of the Piobaireachd Society.

Like the MacCrimmons, the MacArthurs were persons of considerable importance.

Pennant, during his tour of Skye in 1772, "took a repast at Sir Alexander MacDonald's piper, who, according to antient custom, by virtue of his office, holds his lands free. His dwelling consists of several appartments—the first for his cattle during winter; the second is his hall; the third for the reception of strangers; and the fourth for the lodging of his family."

We last hear of the MacArthurs at the funeral of Flora MacDonald in 1790.

The mortal remains of the MacArthurs lie in Kilmuir Churchyard. On a flat grave-stone is the following interesting inscription. The letters are so weathered and overgrown with moss that they are hard to read, and at first glance appear to be written in a foreign tongue. The inscription reads :

HERE LY
THE REMAINS OF
CHARLES MAC
KARTER WHOSE
FAME AS AN HON
EST MAN AND
REMARKABLE PIP
ER WILL SURVIVE
THIS GENERATION
FOR HIS MANNERS
WERE EASY & REG
ULAR AS HIS
MUSIC & THE
MELODY OF
HIS FINGERS WILL

After the word "will" the inscription ends abruptly, for Charles MacArthur's son was drowned while crossing the Minch from Harris with cattle and the quaint inscription was his doing.

The epitaph is, one infers, of a descendant of the Charles MacArthur concerning whom the following story is told:—

Sir Alexander MacDonald of the Isles, while on a visit to MacLeod at Dunvegan Castle, heard with delight the playing of Padruig *Og* MacCrimmon. Sir Alexander told the great piper that he had a young man in his own country who showed promise as a player, and he felt that a course at the MacCrimmon college would do him much good. Padruig *Og* told Sir Alexander MacDonald that he would be delighted to be of any service to him, and young MacArthur went to Boreraig and studied there for eleven years. At the end of that time Padruig *Og* took him back to Sir Alexander at Duntulm Castle.

When the two pipers arrived at Duntulm they found that MacKenzie of Gairloch was a guest at the castle, and along with him his celebrated blind piper, Iain *Dall* MacKay.

Sir Alexander MacDonald of the Isles considered the opportunity an excellent one for testing MacArthur's skill. He accordingly made Padruig *Og* MacCrimmon and Charles MacArthur promise to keep their identity secret from Iain *Dall*, and, taking them up to the blind piper, said to him: "I have here a young man who has been learning the pipe for some years. Will you tell me if he is worth the money I have spent on him?" He then asked MacArthur to tune his pipe, and while he played a *pìobaireachd* Iain *Dall* sat in silence. At the close of the tune he said to Sir Alexander: "He gives the notes correctly, and if he takes care he will

The Author, with his wife and Dileas, at Duntulm

excel in his profession. I think a great deal of him." Sir Alexander said that he was delighted to hear so favourable a report. He then mentioned that he had sent *two* pipers to Boreraig for tuition, and, as he intended keeping as his own piper the better of the two, he would now ask the second man to play before Iain *Dall*, to hear his opinion of him also. He then signed to Padruig *Og* MacCrimmon to play.

The excitement of the blind piper increased as the master player brought out the spirit of his tune by his genius, and at the close, before Sir Alexander had time to speak, the blind man exclaimed: "Indeed, Sir Alexander, it is needless to test me in that manner, for although I have lost the eyes of my human body I have still the eyes of my understanding, and if all the players in Scotland were present I should not find it hard to distinguish the last player from them all."

As I finish this chapter I look out upon the castle of Duntulm and picture the scene as the old blind piper from Gairloch listened to the playing of MacCrimmon, while the sea made music beneath the castle walls and the gulls sailed overhead, and I could wish that once again the echo of that immortal pipe might be heard across the lonely shore of Eilean nan Sgiath, the Wingèd Isle.

LEGENDS OF MACLEOD'S COUNTRY

ACROSS the sea-loch from Dunvegan Castle two shapely flat-topped hills rise. Their old names are Healaval Mór and Healaval Beag, but they are now known usually as MacLeod's Tables.

From afar MacLeod's Tables are prominent landmarks. The higher of the two is 1601 feet, the lower 1538 feet above the sea. The view from their summits is wide and extends to the Monach Isles beyond Uist, and even to St Kilda itself.

Around MacLeod's Tables many legends were woven. A few of them still survive, and at the peat fire of a small cottage of Boreraig, ancestral home of the MacCrimmons, I heard one summer's day from a very old man some of these tales. Here is one of them.

A man from Osdale (a place where, so 'tis said, an *each uisge* or water-horse lies buried) one fine day climbed the higher of MacLeod's Tables. On the hill-top he met a

fairy woman who was just three feet in height. She was beautiful to look upon and the man gave her love, but nevertheless returned to his home at Osdale and there married a mortal. But before leaving his fairy lover he was given a promise that she would help him whenever he was in need of her help.

Some time after that the man's wife was to have a child. Again the husband climbed the hill, for his wife was ill and he was desirous of advice. He met his fairy lover among the rocks, just below the hill-top. When he began his story he found it more difficult to tell than he had imagined. "Perhaps," he thought, "she will be jealous if I tell her." And so he altered his story, and all he said was that his cow was about to calve, and, since the animal was ailing, he wished to know how to cure it.

The fairy told him that he was to rub his hand over the cow, and this would cure it. The fairy was generous. She gave the man a bag of gold, so heavy that he could not lift it. The fairy said, "I will carry it for you." She lifted the bag and carried it easily down the hill.

When the man reached his home he rubbed his hand on his wife and she bore him a son.

Shortly afterwards he met the fairy once more on the hill. She was angry with him, and said that he had deceived her in telling her that it was his cow, and not his wife, that was ill. She said that she must have his baby boy. That night the boy disappeared from the house.

Ten years later the man from Osdale again met the fairy. She said to him, "Do you wish a sight of your boy?" He said that he did. The fairy took him with her up Healaval Mór and tapped on the rock. The door of the *sithean* or

fairy dwelling opened. The man, before entering the dwelling, wished to stick his knife into the door (for otherwise he could never leave of his own free will), but the fairy said there was no need for this as she did not wish to keep him.

When he entered the *sithean* he found it the most beautiful house he had ever seen. The mother and the father of the fairy were there. They were each a thousand years old. His boy was there, alive and well. The man was glad to see him. The fairy said, "In ten years I will marry your son." She gave the man another sack of gold. He was unable to lift it. She raised it to her shoulder with ease and carried it for him. The man returned home with his treasure.

Ten years later he climbed to MacLeod's Table for the wedding of his son to the fairy. When he reached the fairy house he found it filled with handsome men and beautiful women. There was a splendid feast prepared. The fairy asked the man how his gold was lasting out. "It is pretty near finished," said he. This time the fairy filled two bags of gold. The man was unable to lift them. The fairy put them on her shoulder and carried them with ease. When they parted she told him again that if ever he should want her help she would do her best for him. Presumably (but this did not come into the narrative) the fairy and the man's son were married.

As the old man finished his story a summer gale was shrieking around the house, and the flying spray half hid Loch Dunvegan. His wife sat by him as he told his tale, and I could see that she did not quite like all this talk about beautiful fairies, but regardless of her he now commenced

his second story. He was an accomplished *sgeulaiche*, and during his narratives never allowed the attention of his hearers to wander.

His second story was on Fingal, or Fionn, that early hero-warrior of the Gaels and captain of that legendary band of valiant and chivalrous men whose era was in the third or fourth century.

"One winter," said the old man, as he crouched by the peat fire, "Fionn was forgetting to find winter quarters for some of his men. He was climbing MacLeod's Table. There he met a fairy three feet in height. He told her he was looking for lodgings for his men. She took him into the *sithean* in the rock. Within was the most wonderful dwelling. Fionn took all his nine hundred warriors inside the *sithean*, and, although they were nine hundred, they were only taking up the one side of the house.

"They had scarcely got settled in when there came a knock, and who should be here but the King of Greece with nine hundred men. Fionn said to the fairy that the King of Greece and his men could go to the other side of the house, but he and his warriors would stay where they were. After some time what should be at the door but another knock, and here was the King of Spain with nine hundred men. Fionn said that they should go to the other side of the house. He would stay where he was. It was not long after that another knock came. Another king was at the door, and nine hundred men along with him. Fionn said that this king too was to go to the other side of the room.

"There was still some space left, although by now there were three times nine hundred men on that side of the

house. Fionn now called to the fairy that he and his men wanted meat. The fairy said that a bull would be ready in twenty minutes. Fionn said that one bull was little enough for all of them. When the roast bull was brought they began to eat, and the three kings and their men were doing their best to pull away the table from Fionn and his men. Fionn ordered that every man should eat with one hand and hold the table with the other. But at length it came to fighting, and Fionn and his men fought against the three kings and their men. At last the victory rested with the Feinne (the Fingalians), and Fingal's two dogs, Fraoch and Bran, killed even more men than his magic sword."

Here is another story of olden times.

"Before the day that MacLeod came to Dunvegan, before the time when there was a MacDonald in Sleat, Fionn, or Fingal, was living on an island of Loch Dunvegan. One day he saw a woman walking on the sea towards him. She was tall, and there was but one eye on her, and that on the middle of her head. Ossian, Diarmid, and indeed all Fingal's six sons, tried to keep the woman back, but she was getting the better of them. Diarmid said, 'I will keep the woman occupied if the rest of you will dig a hole, and then we will put the woman into the hole.' This was before Fingal had received his magic sword, or he would easily have got the better of the woman with that. Well, they dug the hole while Diarmid kept her occupied, and then they all pushed the one-eyed woman into the hole.

"The next day who should they see coming over the moor but a tall man with one leg. At every step he was covering ten yards of ground. A black cat was with him.

The stranger asked the Feinne if they had seen an unknown woman with one eye. They said, 'Yes.' The stranger said, 'Well, it will be impossible to kill her except you put her to the bottom of the sea.'

"The stranger was the Fairy Blacksmith. The stranger then went away. Diarmid and Fionn and all the Feinne ran after him, but he was taking ten yards at every stride. It was not easy to keep him in sight. Through time the Fairy Blacksmith reached the Fairy Smithy. He entered it and closed the door. Diarmid was the first after him, and he managed to open the smithy door and get inside. Diarmid asked the Fairy Blacksmith for a sword. The blacksmith said he would give him one. There were many smiths working at the sword. Every smith had four hands. While forging the sword they sang a refrain.[1]

"The sword was finished; it was given to Diarmid. The Fairy Blacksmith told Diarmid that there was one way only to temper the sword, and that was by running it through the body of the first person who entered the door of the smithy. The Fairy Blacksmith's mother appeared at the door. Diarmid said to the Fairy Blacksmith (for he was anxious about his own brothers, in case they might come in), 'Now will you temper the sword?' The Fairy Blacksmith did not break his word. He ran his mother through and the sword was tempered. Diarmid gave the sword to Fionn, his father. It was ever afterwards known as the Magic Sword of Fionn, or Fingal. Fionn could stretch with it three yards on every side."

Another story of the days of long ago I heard by the peat fire of Boreraig. It was of Fearchar *Dubh* (Black

[1] A song is sung also at the forging of the sword of Siegfried.

Farquhar). This Farquhar killed a neighbour's sheep with a *cas chrom*.[1] When the owner of the sheep came up Farquhar killed him likewise. He then tried to escape to Harris, but a gale sprang up, and his boat was driven ashore on an island not far from Dunvegan. MacLeod, the chief, came up with him there, in his galley. Fearchar *Dubh* shot MacLeod with an arrow through the leg and pinned him to the mast. Fearchar said, "MacLeod, it was as easy for me to shoot you through the body as through the leg." He asked MacLeod to leave him. MacLeod left him. He, Black Farquhar, fled to Harris.

After some years in Harris he wearied for Skye. He sailed back to Skye, wondering how he would be received. He went to the castle at Dunvegan. He asked MacLeod for pardon. MacLeod sent for the brother of Fearchar *Dubh* and ordered an egg to be placed upon his head. He then said to Black Farquhar that he was to shoot the egg off his brother's head. Black Farquhar fired. He shot the egg. Then he turned to MacLeod. He said, "MacLeod, I had the two arrows. The second was for you if I had missed the egg and killed my brother." [2]

In the Isle of Skye there are still some people (and they are not all of the older generation) who believe in the existence of mermaids.

Not many years ago a party of boys from a crofting township on Loch Dunvegan went to bathe in the sea. Now the day was Sunday, and no pious lad should be taking to the water on that day. The boys were stripping

[1] A small primitive wooden plough worked by hand.

[2] It is interesting to notice the resemblance of this tale to the story of William Tell.

on the shore of the loch when one of their number saw what he thought must be a boy from a neighbouring township swimming in the sea. The lad pointed out the stranger to his companions, and they all watched with admiration the skill of the swimmer. But, as the strange person approached, they saw with alarm that it was no boy, but had the tail of a fish and the head and breasts of a girl.

For some time they watched it. Each one of them was convinced he had seen a mermaid, and vowed that never again would he bathe on a Sabbath morning instead of going to the kirk

DUNVEGAN

ON the western seaboard of the Isle of Skye, drenched by the waves of the sea and blown upon by eager winds from mist-swept Atlantic plains, three celebrated *duns*, or fortresses, stand. These are Dunscaith, Duntulm, and Dunvegan. Of the three Dunvegan alone is inhabited now. This fine old castle has been from time immemorial the home of the chief of the MacLeods. Here a succession of chiefs of a great Highland clan have ruled their little kingdom, and have led their clansmen on many a wild foray, so that to-day the old castle tells of many things that belong to a past age.

Dunvegan Castle is situated on the shores of the long sea-loch which bears its name. Beyond the Minch are seen the Outer Hebrides, and on the horizon, towards the east, rise the blue peaks of the jagged Cuillin.

It is probable that Dunvegan Castle and Glamis Castle (in Angus) are the two oldest inhabited Scottish castles. Dunvegan Castle is so pre-eminent that in Gaelic it is spoken of always as "An Dun," meaning THE fortress. Similarly, the loch on which it stands is spoken of in Gaelic

not as Loch Dunvegan but as Loch an Duin—the loch of THE fortress.

There is a tradition that the castle was built in the ninth century by a Viking named Began. During the latter part of that century Norse colonies were founded in different parts of the Hebrides, and, like many other Highland families, the MacLeods are of Norse descent. The keep, the sea gate (which is supposed to date from the eleventh century), and the lower part of the tower are all that is left of the original castle; the Fairy Tower dates from 1490.

Boswell, in his *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, mentions that, when he and Dr Samuel Johnson visited Dunvegan in 1773 as the guests of MacLeod, the sea gate had been, until a short time before their visit, "the only means of access to the castle, and that visitors who came by land were under the necessity of getting into a boat, and sailed round to the only place where it could be approached."

Dunvegan is so full of interesting relics that it is possible to mention only a few of them. Probably the most cherished possession of the MacLeods is the Fairy Flag. It is a small square piece of very rich cream-coloured silk—at one time it must have been larger—and on it are crosses wrought in gold thread, and several "elf spots" stitched with great care. The "elf spots" can still be seen as the banner lies in its glass case on the wall of what is now the drawing-room of the castle.

There are several traditions which narrate how this interesting and evidently very ancient clan banner came into the MacLeod family.

In far-off days one of the chiefs took as his bride a fairy girl, with eyes with the brown depths of moorland lochs in

them. Her beauty was such that she cast a spell upon all who saw her. For twenty years the fairy and the great Highland chief lived in happiness at Dunvegan; then came to the fairy a longing to return to her own people in the Country of the Young. Daily this longing grew, until at last she was powerless to fight against it. She told all to MacLeod, and with hearts that were heavy with sorrow the two left the castle. Across the heather they walked together until they reached a small moorland burn. Here his fairy wife left MacLeod, but as a parting gift she handed him the Fairy Flag, which should have power to save the clan from disaster on three separate occasions. The little bridge that spans the burn where the parting took place is called to this day the Fairy Bridge.

The second tradition makes the Fairy Flag of eastern origin. MacLeod was crusading. During a long and lonely ride he came to a river and proceeded to cross it by a ford. A fairy maiden rose from the water and opposed his passage. After a severe struggle he overcame her and crossed the stream. The fairy then gave him a box of scented wood. In it, she told him, were several smaller boxes, each of which exactly fitted the one outside it. Within the inmost box rested the magic banner, the waving of which would bring forth a host of armed men to help the clan. "Take it home," the fairy said, "and wave the flag in the hour of danger, but do not dare to open the box for a year and a day. If you do open it, for another year and a day no crops will grow in your land, no sheep nor cattle will have young, no children will be born."

There is yet a third tradition concerning the Fairy Flag, and of this tradition there are several versions. One fine

Dunvegan Castle, from a print after the painting by Daniels

autumn evening a beautiful fairy paid a visit to Dunvegan Castle. Without any difficulty she passed through several closed doors and made her way to what is now known as the Fairy Tower, where the infant heir of the chief was lying in his cradle. The nurse was with the baby, but even had she wished to oppose the fairy's entrance she would have been powerless to do so, for some potent spell made it impossible for her to move.

Taking no notice of the nurse the fairy passed straight to the cradle, took the child on her knee, wrapped about him the Fairy Flag, and sang to him what has since become the famous Fairy Lullaby of Dunvegan. Both the words and the tune were so remarkable that they impressed themselves on the nurse's memory, and from that time she habitually lulled the child to sleep by singing the song which the fairy had sung with such sad sweetness. As the years passed, it came to be believed that any infant of the chief's family over whom this crooning song was sung would be protected throughout his life by the Fairy Hosts, and for a long time no nurse was employed who could not sing it. Then for some two hundred years no MacLeod chief was born in the castle, and the custom ceased to be observed, but the lullaby was not forgotten, and when Sir Reginald MacLeod of MacLeod was born in the castle in 1847, the fairy song was sung to him by his nurse. Many of the Gaelic words of the croon are obsolete, so the song must date from a very early period. There is an emphatic statement in the last verse that the chief is of Scandinavian descent.

Another version of this tradition narrates that one day, in the great banqueting hall of the castle, the MacCrimmons,

hereditary pipers, and the O'Merghases, hereditary harpers, were playing at a feast given to celebrate the birth of an heir. The nurse left the babe for a while to join in the festivities. The coverings slipped off the child and he began to cry. A multitude of fairies entered the room and wrapped the child in the Fairy Banner. The nurse soon returned and, finding the babe thus, took him in the mystic flag to the assembled clansmen. As all present looked in wonder at the heir the hall was filled with the beautiful music of the Fairies' Lullaby—*Taladh na mna sithe*.

The Fairy Banner was treated with great reverence by the MacLeods. In battle, the chief marched before it and was bound to lay down his life in its defence. The hereditary standard-bearer carried it, and surrounding him were twelve men chosen for their valour. Each of these men held the flagstaff in one hand and his naked sword-blade in his other.[1] The Banner must have been carried furled, for its magic powers could come forth only when it was unfurled, and then only on three occasions.

According to the Bannatyne MS. the Fairy Flag has been waved on two occasions of dire extremity. The first was at the Battle of Glendale about 1490, which was the most tremendous battle the MacLeods ever fought; the second at the Battle of the Spoiled Dyke, at Vaternish (Trumpan), in 1580. The third, and last, occasion on which the flag was unfurled was in strange fulfilment of a stranger prophecy.[2] The prophecy was made by Coinneach Odhar,

[1] It is difficult to see how each of the twelve men could have grasped the flagstaff: probably those nearest to it were the only men who actually did so.

[2] See p. 146.

and was as follows: "When Norman, the fourth Norman (Tormod nan Tri Tormod), the son of the slender, bony, English lady, should perish by an accidental death; when MacLeod's Maidens (dark rocks on the coast) should become the property of a Campbell; when a fox should have young ones in one of the turrets of the castle; and when the Fairy Flag should for the last time be taken out of its box and unfurled, then the glory of the MacLeods would depart, a great part of the lands would be sold, and a *curach*, or coracle, would be sufficiently large to carry all the gentlemen tacksmen of the name of MacLeod on the estate across Loch an Duin; but that in times far distant another Iain Breac would arise who would redeem the estates, and raise the power and honour of the house of MacLeod to a higher flood than ever."

The fulfilment of this prophecy came about in the following remarkable manner. In the summer of 1799 an English smith, at that time staying in Dunvegan, and a Mr Buchanan, business manager to the chief, unknown to any one of the family broke open the iron chest in which they believed the fairy flag to be, and found a box of strongly scented wood, inside which was the famous banner, which they examined.

About the same time came the news that Norman, the fourth Norman, while serving as a lieutenant in the navy, had been blown up in H.M.S. *Queen Charlotte*. Then the property of Orbost, on which were situated MacLeod's Maidens, was sold to Angus Campbell of Ensay. But, more extraordinary still, a tame fox belonging to Lieutenant MacLeod had young in the west turret of the castle. Although at the time the prophecy was made (about two

hundred years before its fulfilment) there were more than twoscore of tacksmen of the name of MacLeod on the estate, not one remains now, and the property has considerably diminished in size, for Orbost, Vaternish, Glendale, and a large part of Bracadale are now in other hands. It was hoped that the youthful Iain Breac would fulfil the concluding part of the prophecy, but he was killed in the Great War, on 17th April, 1915, and there is now no male heir in direct descent.

Another precious relic in Dunvegan Castle is a very ancient Communion Cup. It is thought to have been the property of Niall *Glunn-dubh*, King of Ulster in 990. The cup is ten inches high, and is made of wood, the fine silver work having been added in the fourteenth or fifteenth century. Each side of the cup has its own pattern. On all four sides appear triangles—emblems of the Trinity—and circles—emblems of Eternity. These circles and triangles are arranged with extraordinary ingenuity. The cup stands on four silver legs. Its sacred use is indicated by the letters I H S four times repeated inside the rim. A few bits of coral remain on the outside of the cup, and it is evident that other corals have been lost from the settings in which they were fixed. Sir Walter Scott, who stayed at the castle in 1815, was much interested in this cup and described it minutely in a letter.

Concerning the drinking-horn of Rorie Mór—another heirloom—Boswell, in his *Journal of a Tour in the Hebrides*, writes: "We looked at Rory More's drinking-horn, which is a large cow's horn, with the mouth of it ornamented with silver curiously carved. It holds rather more than a bottle and a half. Every Laird of MacLeod, it is said, must, as a

proof of his manhood, drink it off full of claret, without laying it down."

There are two traditions regarding the origin of the horn. One is that it came from a fierce bull which Malcolm, the third chief, killed in Glenelg in the fourteenth century with only a short hunting-knife. According to another legend, MacLeod was the guest of the Earl of Argyll at Inveraray. During his visit a man for some misdeed was sentenced to be killed by a bull, and was placed in an enclosure with the animal. Argyll and his guests assembled to watch the drama. MacLeod, seeing the unhappy victim in the arena with the bull, said to Argyll: "Will you give him to me if I save him?" "Yes," said Argyll, "but you go to your death." MacLeod, springing into the arena, seized the bull by the horns. "Hold fast what you do, hold fast!" came a cry, and before the echo had died MacLeod had plunged his *sgian dubh* into the neck of the bull. MacLeod took the man back to Dunvegan, and it is interesting that there lived at Dunvegan until recently a family of Campbells with a bull's head as their crest and "Hold fast" as their motto.

In Dunvegan one sees suits of ancient and rusty chain mail that may have been worn by the ancestors of the MacLeods at a very remote period. Relics of more recent times are a great two-handed broadsword and a bow ("which," says Boswell, "hardly any man can now bend") belonging to Rorie Mór. There is also the sword of Sir Norman of Bernera, who led the MacLeods at the Battle of Worcester, where the clan lost upwards of a thousand men. There are preserved some lace belonging to Flora MacDonald, her pin-cushion with the names of all who suffered in the

'45 on it, and her stays. The waistcoat worn by Prince Charles Edward at the ball held the night before the Battle of Prestonpans, and two glasses, one of them chipped, which bear the Prince's portrait, are also among the treasures of the castle.

Memories of Dr Johnson's visit remain here. One evening, it is said, the learned doctor drank so many cups of tea that his hostess suggested she had better give him the slop-basin instead of a cup. Johnson was much annoyed and said, "When will these ladies cease making impertinent remarks?"

But the doctor had a warm regard for the MacLeods of Dunvegan, as is evinced from the following interesting letter, written to MacLeod as Johnson and Boswell were about to leave Skye. The letter is as follows:—

> Dear Sir,—We are now on the margin of the sea, waiting for a boat and a wind. Boswell grows impatient, but the kind treatment which I find wherever I go makes me leave with some heaviness of heart an Island which I am not very likely to see again.
>
> Having now gone as far as horses can carry us we thankfully return them. My steed will, I hope, be received with kindness; he has borne me, heavy as I am, over ground both rough and steep with great fidelity, and for the use of him, as for your other favours, I hope you will believe me thankful, and willing, at whatever distance we may be placed, to show my sense of your kindness by any offices of friendship that may fall within my power.
>
> Lady MacLeod and the young ladies have by their

hospitality and politeness made an impression on my mind which will not easily be effaced. Be pleased to tell them that I remember them with great tenderness and great respect.—I am, Sir, Your most obliged and most humble servant, (Signed) Sam. Johnson.

Ostig, 28*th Sept.* 1773.

About a century before Johnson and Boswell were guests at Dunvegan, one of the most celebrated of Skye poetesses had her home in the castle. Mary MacLeod was her name, and she was a kinswoman of the chief. Among her own people she was always known as Mairi Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh—Mary, the Daughter of Red Alasdair. She belonged to the MacLeods of St Kilda, and in one of her poems she tells that she nursed five chiefs of the MacLeods. She composed a satire upon one of the chiefs, which so displeased him that he banished her to the Isle of Mull, or (some say) the Island of Jura beside it. That beautiful *pìobaireachd*, "Cumha Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh," or "Lament for Mary MacLeod," was composed by the MacCrimmon of the day when he saw the poetess sail south from Dunvegan on her exile. She never thought to see Skye again, but Iain Breac, the sixteenth chief, pardoned her, and she returned to Dunvegan to be his bard.

Her *Cronan*, or Lullaby, to Norman, who afterwards became the eighteenth chief, is one of the outstanding Gaelic poems which exist.

Mary MacLeod died in 1693 at the great age of 105.

Perhaps the most interesting room in Dunvegan Castle is the present drawing-room. This room was formerly the banqueting hall, where the MacCrimmons played, and

where the young chief, that day of long ago, was taken to the assembled clansmen wrapped in the mystic fairy flag.

In the south-west angle of the room is a recess which may have been a secret chamber.

Mirth and tragedy walked hand in hand in this pleasant room in olden days. Here Iain *Dubh*, who had treacherously assassinated Donald, the tenth chief, in the middle of the sixteenth century, and had assumed the chiefship, murdered a party of Campbells whom the Earl of Argyll had sent to obtain information on the state of affairs at Dunvegan. Iain *Dubh*, pretending friendship, received the Campbells hospitably and invited eleven of their chief men to a banquet. At the feast each Campbell was placed with a MacLeod on either side of him.

After the banquet eleven cups of blood placed before the visitors prepared them for their end, and a few seconds later each Campbell received the dirk of a MacLeod in his heart.

By none was Iain *Dubh* more cordially detested than his own clan, and he ruled entirely by the strength of his arm, until he was seized by an Irish chief during a visit to Erin, and was put to death by having a red-hot iron forced into his bowels.

Even at the present day the spirit of the past pervades the old castle of Dunvegan. When the west wind crosses Loch an Duin with irresistible fury, when spindrift is lifted from the loch and the Tables of MacLeod are invisible behind ragged mists, one seems to hear, above the cracking of the oaks as they bend and sometimes break before the squalls, the echo of a ghostly pipe. Donald *Ban* MacCrimmon as he left the castle on the adventure

of the '45 prophesied "Cha till MacCrioman"—"MacCrimmon will not return." He did not return in the flesh, for he was slain at the Rout of Moy, but one cannot doubt that his is the wild pipe music which is heard sometimes in the old castle on a night of storm when the moon is at the full.

VATERNISH: A PROMONTORY OF SKYE

SKYE is an isle of many promontories, and Vaternish, as its name tells, is one of them. It is the Water Ness, or Point, and was named thus by the Norse raiders because the Minch washed it on three sides.

Let us visualise the past, and see Vaternish with the mind's eye on a calm summer Sabbath towards the close of the sixteenth century.

The little church of Kilconan at Trumpan is thronged with worshippers.

During the service the galleys of Clanranald approach the shore, sailing in across the Minch from South Uist, where Clanranald's Country lies. Vaternish is in MacLeod's Country, and between MacLeod and Clanranald is a bitter feud, for the MacDonalds of Clanranald remember in their hearts the black day of the massacre of Eigg. On that day, fifty years before, many of their clan, concealed in a secret cave upon the Island of Eigg, were discovered by a superior

body of the MacLeods through footprints in the snow. The MacLeods, lighting a fire at the mouth of the cave, suffocated every man, woman, and child within.

And so, as we see each *birlinn*, or galley, rowed in towards the shore and made fast to a small natural arch, we know that this Sunday visit portends nothing good for MacLeod's Country.

The tide is at the ebb. A small thing, perhaps, yet one destined to have far-reaching consequences for the raiders. Cautiously the men of Clanranald surround the church. They hear, perchance, the tuneful cadences of an old psalm chanted in Gaelic by the unsuspecting worshippers within. But the hearts of the raiders are merciless, for they burn with hatred and a desire for revenge. Picture the dismay of the congregation when there is a loud shout of triumph at the church door, and they look over their shoulders to see the door guarded by armed men, compassionless and triumphant.

Escape is impossible. Resistance is equally impossible, for there are no weapons in the little church. As the congregation waits—the women and children in terror, their men-folk defiant, yet powerless against the claymores that guard the narrow door—wisps of pungent smoke enter the building and soon the crackle of flames is heard. Clanranald has fired the church!

Shrieks and wailings echo and re-echo through the doomed building, while outside Clanranald's piper plays wild and scornful music to drown the cries of the dying. Unperceived in the dense smoke the solitary survivor of the massacre squeezes herself, with the infliction of mortal injuries, through the narrow slit of a window. She is a

cailleach named Mearerad, or Margaret, and she staggers dying across the moss and heather to seek help.

Their evil deed accomplished, Clanranald and his men march upon Dunvegan. Their arrival has been reported, and the fiery-cross is sent swiftly round MacLeod's Country. Midway between Trumpan and Dunvegan the MacLeods meet their enemies and drive them back on Trumpan. Here a bloody fight is commenced upon the green *machair* at Ardmore. At first the fortune of battle rests now with MacLeod, now with Clanranald. All of a sudden the MacLeods are miraculously increased in numbers in the eyes of their enemies. Where they stood in scores they now stand in hundreds.

The Fairy Flag has been unfurled!

Now it was [1] the virtue of the Fairy Flag that it caused the MacLeods to be multiplied in the eyes of the enemy. It could act miraculously on three occasions only, and to-day it is unfurled for the second time.

The tide of battle now definitely goes against the raiders. Clanranald and his men make for the shore in disorder. To their dismay they find their galleys left high and dry by the ebbing tide, and across the great boulders and slippery stones it is impossible to launch them while the battle rages. Utterly disheartened, with their means of escape cut off, the MacDonalds sell their lives dearly. The battle becomes a slaughter, but the defence is sufficiently strong to allow of a single galley being launched. In her a few of Clanranald's men make their escape and return to South Uist with their bad tidings.

At last no single raider remains alive on shore, and a

[1] See p. 136.

swift revenge has come to the murderers of women and children.

One of the heroes of that battle of long ago was a tailor. This man was a skilled archer, and during the fight he picked off the enemy, one by one, with arrows that had been sharpened for him by his women-folk upon a stone beside the small burn that flows near the church. To this day the arrow mark on the stone shows clearly, and brings vividly to the mind that day, more than three hundred years ago, when the MacLeods exacted stern reparation from the MacDonalds of Clanranald for an inexcusable crime.

On the day of the Battle of Vaternish a broad stone dyke crossed the *machair* of Ardmore where grass and shore meet. To this dyke the MacLeods carried the bodies of their enemies and heaped them beneath it. This done, they rolled the stones of the dyke upon the bodies of the slain.

The battle is still known as Blar Milleadh Garaidh, the Battle of the Spoiled Dyke. It must be distinguished from the Battle of Vaternish, which was fought about the same time between the same enemies and is commemorated by a beautiful MacCrimmon *pìobaireachd*.

Through all the long years that have elapsed the wall has never been rebuilt. It is now nothing more than a long grassy mound running parallel with the shore a few yards above the mark of high tide. There must be many skeletons and bones lying beneath these grass-grown stones. A skull was recently unearthed here and human bones are frequently found.

On the day when I visited the roofless ruin of the small church at Trumpan the west wind blew with the force of half a gale, and short waves broke unceasingly upon Ardmore, where, 'tis said, the Druids once offered sacrifices to

the gods. Across the Minch rose the hills of South Uist, whence the ill-fated galleys of Clanranald sailed at dawn on that Sunday of long ago. Dark against driving storm clouds Dunvegan Head stood out against the sinking sun. Curlew flew with wild, complaining cries along the shore, and over the sea white-plumaged solans fished.

Lonely Vaternish can tell of many "old forgotten far-off things." It was here that Lady Grange died in 1745. This lady, who spied upon her husband while he plotted for the Jacobite cause, was "seized in her lodging in Edinburgh at midnight on the 22nd day of January, 1732—a cloth was tied over her face to prevent her from seeing where she was going or calling for assistance, and, having been placed on horseback, she was led away at dead of night. After a fatiguing and dangerous journey across one of the wildest districts of Scotland, she was detained a prisoner in Castle Tyrim (Clanranald's stronghold in Moidart) until removed to the remote island of Heiskar, on the west coast of North Uist, then belonging to Sir Alexander MacDonald, where she was kept for nearly two years. Thence she was removed to St Kilda, where she was detained for seven years, debarred from holding any communication, even by letter, with her friends. After ten years of banishment she at length managed to send a note to her friends concealed in a ball of yarn. Steps were then taken to rescue her, but before they could be successful she was removed from St Kilda to Assynt, and thence to Skye, where it was said she was for some time kept in a cave, but her persecutors, finding it too troublesome to attend to her there, allowed her to leave it and go where she pleased. By that time her reason had given way, and she wandered over Skye in a state of idiocy,

supported by the charity of the people, until at length she was overcome with misery and disease, and closed her chequered career at Idrigal, in Vaternish, in the month of May 1745. She was secretly buried in the churchyard of Trumpan." [1]

At Roag, on the peninsula of Ardmore, there lived a well-known Skye family named MacSuan or MacSwan. It is, I believe, on a member of this family that a beautiful old *pìobaireachd* was composed. The *pìobaireachd*, a long and testing one, is known as the "Lament for MacSwan of Roag."

From Ardmore one looks across to the island of Isay, in Loch Dunvegan. MacLeod offered Isay to Dr Samuel Johnson, on condition that the learned journalist should reside upon it for three months in each year. In Boswell's *Journal* we read the following account of the offer: "Dr Johnson was highly amused. He talked a great deal of this island—how he would build a house there—how he would fortify it—how he would have cannon—how he would plant—how he would sally out and TAKE the Isle of Muck—and he then laughed with uncommon glee, and could hardly leave off. . . . MacLeod encouraged the fancy of Dr Johnson's becoming owner of an island; told him that it was the practice in this country to name every man by his lands; and begged leave to drink to him in that mode —'Island Isay, your health!'"

In the old days human life was held cheap, and many a life was cut short upon the sinister Cnoc a' Chrochaidh (the Hanging Knoll) at Trumpan. Coins bearing the date 1604 were found here. They were in a cranny of a rock, where they may have been hidden by some victim

[1] Cameron's *History and Traditions of the Isle of Skye.*

during the few minutes given him to make his peace with heaven before being hoisted skyward at the end of a rope.

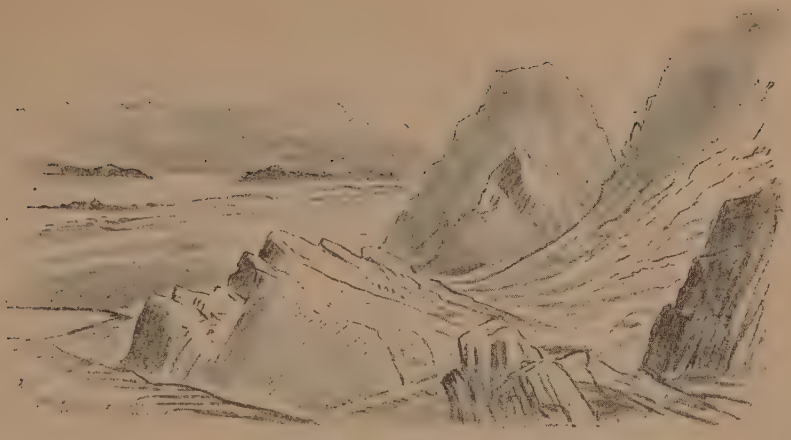
Above the Hanging Knoll is Beinn a' Ghobhain (the Smith's Hill). It takes its name from the old smithy where the arrows were forged for the Battle of the Spoiled Dyke.

Other relics of a past age are the remains of long wolf traps. These are on the hill near Trumpan, and must be of a great age, for the oldest inhabitant has no tradition of when the last wolf was trapped in Skye.

The traps are long pits dug in the hillside. In length they are some 24 feet, and in breadth approximately 3 feet. They are now almost filled in, but their shape can be seen at a glance. The entrance, too, is visible. There is a tradition among the old people of Vaternish that the bait for the wolves was a piece of flesh placed near the upper end of the trap—the traps were all dug parallel with the slope of the hill—and presumably the wolf was imprisoned on entering by a door which closed behind it.

Thus, with its spoiled dyke and its wolf traps, Vaternish is rich in things of the past. The old church at Trumpan stands just as it did that Sunday three hundred and fifty years ago when it became suddenly a smouldering, roofless ruin. The font lies neglected and forgotten. It is a stone with a natural cup-shaped hollow, and it is said that even in the hottest summer weather the hollow is never without water.

Centuries pass, but the sea and the hills are unchanging, and the heather upon Beinn a' Ghobhain blossoms as it did that Sabbath day of long ago, when the green *machair* at Ardmore was crimsoned with the blood of the men of Clanranald while yet the blue smoke from the roofless church of Trumpan rose upon the quiet air of a summer night.



TROTTERNISH OF SKYE

Trotternish mhor nam bonnach
Far an d' fhag am boch a bheannachd.

(Great Trotternish of the bannocks where the poor man left his blessing.)—*Old Gaelic saying.*

NORTH of the Cuillin hills Skye is divided into four great districts—Minginish, Duirinish, Vaternish, and Trotternish.

All these names are Norse. They are a relic of the days of a thousand years ago when the vikings ruled in Eilean a' Cheò, the Isle of Mist.

Trotternish is the most northerly division of the four. It extends northward from Braigh Throtternish (the Braes) to Rudha Hunish,[1] and the isles of Fladda Chuain and Trodday are within its boundaries.

The records of Trotternish (which is sometimes known as the Granary of Skye because of its rich soil) go far back into the mists of antiquity. We read[2] that, in 1309, King

[1] *Hunish* is Bear's Ness. The *Rudha* is redundant, and was inserted by those ignorant of the meaning of the original Norse place-name.

[2] *Robertson's Index*, p. 2, No. 58.

Robert the Bruce granted "Trouternes" to Hugh Ross. At a later date (as I have mentioned in the chapter on Duntulm) Trotternish was the chief stronghold of the MacDonalds of the Isles, and to this day preserves its old-world atmosphere.

The history of Trotternish is a turbulent one. For long the MacLeods and the MacDonalds strove for its rich lands. In the year 1498 MacLeod was in possession of Trotternish. He was bound to have ready for the use of the Crown one galley of twenty-six oars and two galleys of sixteen oars each. It is interesting to read in the old charter which was granted to "Alexandro Makcloid de Dunbegane," and is still preserved at Dunvegan, that the falcons' nests were reserved to the King. The rule of the MacLeods in the district terminated soon after that, and from the sixteenth century up to recent years Trotternish was one of the lands of the MacDonalds of the Isles.

In *MacFarlane's Geographical Collection*, vol. ii, we read: "Drointernes is the next Countrie to Vadernes and Brayhairport, doeth lye North from McLeod's countrie, and two Loghes doeth come, one of them from the west betwixt Drointernes. The one of them Logh Ri . . . the other Lochsinsort. These two Loches maketh almost Drunternes to be ane yland by itself. There is a Castle in this countrie which is called Duntoylme, in Drointernes. And it is builded on ane high rock above the sea. . . . It is a most pleasant, profitabl and most fertill Countrey both of corne and abundances of milk. Duntalme the chieff place of residence belonging to McDonald built upon a rock 200 fathom above the sea. The Lord or Superior therof Donald Gorme McDonald of Sleitt."

The old account with its quaint spelling proceeds: "The inhabitants of this Island are much addicted to swimming, wherin they are verie expert. They are great lovers of all sorts of Musick."

In Skye of the present day the love of swimming has gone; the love of music remains.

The name of Flora MacDonald will be remembered always in Trotternish; her memorial stands in the small burying-ground at Kilmuir.

After Culloden, Prince Charles Edward was concealed for a time by Clanranald in South Uist. Under the guidance of Floireag a' Phrionnsa (as Flora MacDonald is still known in Trotternish) he sailed from Uist to Skye on the night of 27th June, 1746. It was a wild night, with fierce wind, heavy seas, and a thunderstorm of great violence. The boat was an open one of 24-feet keel. The crew had been unable to obtain a compass. The craft survived the storm, and at daybreak the crew and their royal passenger found themselves near Vaternish Point. They sailed close inshore, and were preparing to land when they were fired upon by the MacLeod militia (the MacLeods were hostile to the Jacobite cause), and, with bullets riddling her sails, the boat again stood out to sea. The fugitives sailed north, and later in the day landed on a shingly beach between two rocks at Kilbride, in Trotternish, only a few hundred yards from Mugstot, the residence of Sir Alexander MacDonald of the Isles (the MacDonalds had some years previously abandoned Duntulm Castle).

Flora MacDonald, leaving the Prince concealed in woman's clothes in a small cave, with her box for his seat, hastened to see her kinswoman, Lady Margaret MacDonald.

During that night Prince Charles remained concealed in his cave, and early in the morning was visited by MacDonald of Kingsburgh, who was in sympathy with him, although secretly, because of his chief.

The Prince—now known as Betty Burke—and Kingsburgh then set out for Kingsburgh House. Torrential rain was falling, and mist covered the higher grounds. During the walk of twelve miles the burns became so swollen with the rain that some of them could not be crossed, and many diversions had to be made. It was midnight when the strange party arrived at Kingsburgh. Thence, next afternoon, the Prince continued his journey to Portree, and afterwards crossed to the Island of Raasay.

It is a lonely shore where the Prince first set foot on Skye. The beach is full open to the south-west, but sheltered from the north. To the south is a small knoll called Cnoc a' Chrosaich, the Knoll of the Crossing. It received its name because the traveller on arriving here had his first sight of the Church of Saint Bride, and so crossed himself devoutly.

On the September day when I visited the Prince's Strand (as the shore is now called) the sea was calm and blue. In the fields the crofters were reaping their oats or "curing" their hay. Meadow-sweet and scabious were flowering beside the shore, and the blue of the field gentian blended with the purple of the last blossoms of the knapweed. Across Loch Snizort rose the Ascrib Isles Beyond the Minch were seen faintly the hills of Uist and Harris. Mugstot House is much as it was in 1746. The room is unaltered where Flora MacDonald slept the night she landed after her memorable crossing of the Minch. It is a

small house to have been the residence of a great Highland family, and cannot be compared, in appearance or situation, with the castle at Duntulm, which was still standing intact at the time when the family moved to Mugstot.

Not far from the Prince's landing-place is the site of Loch Chaluim Chille—St Columba's Loch. This was the largest fresh-water loch in all Skye, and was drained a century and a half ago at great expense.[1] During the draining of the loch an oaken boat was found, very strong and thick, with a heavy iron ring attached to the stem and another to the stern.

The old island of the loch may be seen at the present day. On this island are the ruins of a monastery of great antiquity, that is said to have been built by Saint Columba in the sixth century. In the seventeenth century it was described as a "tower and a town and the remains of a chapel built of mortar," and Pennant, writing in 1772, notes that "the ruins of the monastery evince its age, being built with great stones, without mortar, in the manner customary in the times of Druidism. The cells and several rooms are still very distinguishable. The chapel is of a later date and built with mortar, as are all the other chapels in Skie and in the little islands along its shores. These chapels were served by the monks."

There is a tradition that the last Norse raiders in Skye were killed on the island of Loch Chaluim Chille. The isle was called Eilean a' Loch.

Certain prophecies concerning Loch Chaluim Chille were made by Coinneach Odhar, the Seer of the West.

[1] See p. 165.

These prophecies are that:

1. The loch on which Callum the monk lived will be drained to the sea.

2. A thunderbolt will fall to the west between the loch and the sea.

3. A church will be built to the east of the loch, and on a day when there will be present "nine nines of name" (notable persons) and "nine without name," with the voice of the preacher in their ears, the church will fall over their heads.

The first two of these prophecies have been fulfilled; the third happily remains unfulfilled.

There is a curious old story told of the island upon Loch Chaluim Chille.

MacDonald of the Isles had fallen out with the chief monk of the monastery and desired his head. MacLeod of Raasay was prevailed upon to murder the man, and MacDonald promised him as a reward all the country between Uig and Portree.

MacLeod of Raasay took with him six men, and ordered them to hide at Kilmuir by the shore of the loch. He himself, disguised as a beggar, went to the shore openly and signalled to the monastery for a boat. "What can I do for you, good man?" said the monk in charge of the boat. "Take me, I beg of you, across to your saintly island," said Mac 'Ille Chaluim. The monk made answer, "I can take you across only on one condition—that you narrate to-night a tale of olden days that will be pleasing to my master." MacLeod said that there was no finer *sgeulaiche* than himself. He was then ferried across.

Duntulm Bay

That night he told the abbot one tale after another, and pleased him so greatly that the holy man asked him to accompany him to his bed-chamber, there to continue the tales. Mac 'Ille Chaluim willingly agreed, but asked that the door of the monastery might be left open through the night, since he was troubled with a sickness that necessitated him going from time to time into the open air. At the conclusion of each of his stories MacLeod of Raasay went to the door, and each time he pushed the boat nearer to the loch (it was high and dry) until it floated.

At last the abbot slept. Raasay then cut off his head with a sword, which he had hidden about his person, carried the head to the boat, and rowed quickly across to the shore. He then collected his men, and set off to claim the promised reward from MacDhonhnaill nan Eilean.

But, when he was told that MacLeod of Raasay and his men were approaching with the abbot's head, MacDonald regretted his rash promise of so much good land.

He sent his own men to wrest the abbot's head from him by force. The MacLeods and the MacDonalds met on a hill near Cuidreach, known as Cnoc Theab. The MacLeods were slain to a man, and each MacLeod head as it rolled down the hill called out "*Theab! theab!*" Thus the knoll received its name.

The loch into which the heads rolled is Lochan nan Ceann, the Lochan of the Heads.

To the south of Cuidreach is the curious fortress-like building known as Caisteal Uisdein (Hugh's Castle). It was built by Uisdean, kinsman of Donald Gorm. Uisdean plotted against his kinsman, and when he was found out

Donald Gorm imprisoned him in the dungeon at Duntulm, where he died.[1]

There is no door to Caisteal Uisdein. The entrance is in the north wall, twelve feet above the ground.

One fine summer's morning a hundred years ago some fishermen, tired after their night at sea, went ashore at Caisteal Uisdein. The day was hot and the fishermen soon slept. But one of them remained awake, and when he returned to his home he told the following story to his daughter, who is still alive. He was lying (he said) on the grass, with the scent of the heather in the air and Loch Snizort like a mirror at his feet, when he saw a weasel emerge from a hole in the castle. In its mouth it carried a small bright object which it tossed repeatedly in the air. At last it laid its toy on a large stone, then entered again the cranny from which it had emerged and brought out a second bright object.

Time after time the weasel did the same thing, and at last had piled a small heap of shining treasure upon the stone. The man then awakened his companions. They walked across to the stone. When the weasel saw them approaching it began to hide its treasure below the rock, and so quickly did it work that the men when they reached the place found only one silver coin. They turned the stone over. There, in a cranny, was a pile of coins, each one bright and shining. The men picked the coins up. The weasel appeared. It began to lament, and then tore at the fur of its throat, biting into the flesh until it fell dead.

[1] See p. 180.

A DAY AT THE PEATS

A MAY morning in Trotternish of Skye. A grey sky; thin showers over the Minch; a light air from the west blowing across the land.

From the wee houses people are appearing. They meet on the road, and a procession is formed to the moor—to the peat moss, where there is to be much hard work before the day is done. The men are handsome, and are bronzed with work on the sea and in the field. The women, despite hard labour, are gentle and graceful.

When the peat moss is reached there is great activity. Some of the people combine to help a neighbour less fortunate than themselves at his or her peat-cutting, others work in little family parties.

It is a peculiarity of Trotternish that peats are dug with an ordinary spade, although in most parts of Skye the old-fashioned wooden spade, or *toirsgian* as it is called, is still used.

In digging peats the topmost layer of vegetation must

first be pared off. Then, working along a straight and narrow strip, the peat-cutter slices off the peats with his spade while his wife, or perhaps one of his children, picks them up and lays them flat on the moor to dry. They rest there, soft and spongy, and altogether unlike the peats that one sees when, fully dried, they burn brightly on the crofter's fires.

Noon comes. The air is warmer. Larks mount into the sky with joyous song. The *cannach*, or bog cotton, waves its feathery heads. Here and there upon the heather peat fires are lighted for the midday meal. Blue smoke rises into the air. It curls slowly upward. White table-cloths are spread upon the moor. Tea is brewed. The people sit round the fire, tired but contented. But the rest is a short one, for there are many peats still to cut and the weather may change.

Work is renewed. Skilfully the brown peats are sliced off. They are thrown across the moor to dry in the sun, and fall with a thud. From time to time branches of hazel trees are dug up; occasionally even the nuts are exposed. Far down in the peat the blades of a wiry grass have been so wonderfully preserved that they are apparently as fresh and strong as on that distant day when they were overgrown by the *sphagnum* moss. That day was centuries ago —even before the time when the boat bearing Prince Charlie crept northward along the shore of Trotternish seeking a quiet harbour. Perhaps Norse galleys sailed the Minch in the summers when these grasses grew and these hazel twigs were clothed with leaves, and Biornal, the Norwegian princess who has her grave beside Quirang, dwelled in Dun Daibhidh.

So the peat-cutters, working without pause, bring vividly to the imagination the old forgotten times.

Now and again a remark in Gaelic is passed round; a joke is enjoyed. The dogs doze contentedly. At the margin of the peat-moss cattle pasture the grass. Flowers of the milkwort, some of them deep blue, others of delicately tinted pink, are growing on the boggy ground. The draw moss, beloved of sheep and deer, is in blossom, and the red lousewort also.

Evening approaches. Everywhere upon the heather wet peats lie. They represent the labour of the day. On the ground they will remain until they are drier. Then they will be set up on end, in threes.

The best peats are black when dry. They are as hard as coal, and burn as brightly and as well. Such peats are of great value, but are not commonly found. Often they are so far from the nearest road that the labour of bringing them in is too great.

Tea-time comes. Fresh peats are thrown upon the moorland fires. Again columns of thick blue smoke rise in the quiet air. Kettles are boiled. The tea is infused. The people discuss the day's work, then wander slowly homeward across the moor, past Martin's Well, past the ruins of Martin's House. This Martin's end was tragic. Though he was of a well-known Skye family his house was humble and thatched. He married a grand lady. Martin one stormy day lay ill in bed with pneumonia. The house was leaking. His wife said to him, "My father's hen-house is better than this." Martin rose from his bed. Ill as he was, he went out into the rain and wind. He repaired the leak in the roof. The next day he was dead.

The Martins [1] are said to have come to Skye from Ireland originally as part of the dowry of Nighean Chathain. In those days men were of more value than money, and so the lady brought with her twenty young men from three Irish clans. We are told that the Martins and the MacQueens were two of these clans; the third is not mentioned.

That early classic, *The Western Isles*, published in 1703, was the work of Martin Martin, a man of immense strength. On the hill near Duntulm is a great stone, known as Ultach Mhartin a' Bhealaich (the Armful of Martin of the Pass), and it is said that Martin Martin placed it in the position in which it now lies and whence none now living can so much as move it.

For centuries the MacQueens held the farm of Garafad, near Staffin, rent free, on condition that they supplied yearly a certain number of salmon to the proprietor. They are said to have lost their farm through their inability to supply MacDonald of the Isles with the requisite number of these fish.

At evening the clouds are dispersing; the air is very clear. Northward, sea and sky are pearly grey. It is hard to see where the two meet, for the sleeping ocean seems as cloud. Rudha Reidh of Gairloch creeps, tapering, out into the Minch. The low coast of Lewis, beyond the blue Shiant Isles, lies on the horizon. Behind the black ruins of Duntulm thin shafts of sunlight move slowly southwards across the Minch, near Harris. They resemble the pale fingers of the Merry Dancers, or the rays of a searchlight.

Pools of light lie upon the Minch. There is no breeze

[1] *New Statistical Account*, vol. xiv.

stirring here. Beinn Rodil of Harris seems near; Eaval, most graceful of Outer Hebridean hills, towers from North Uist. The lesser isles of the Minch—Iasgair, Fladda Chuain, MacDonald's Table—lie peacefully in the clear light.

Upon Clisham of Harris a wandering cloud rests. At first no larger than a man's hand, it grows fast. It encircles the hill, but above it the shapely cone emerges free.

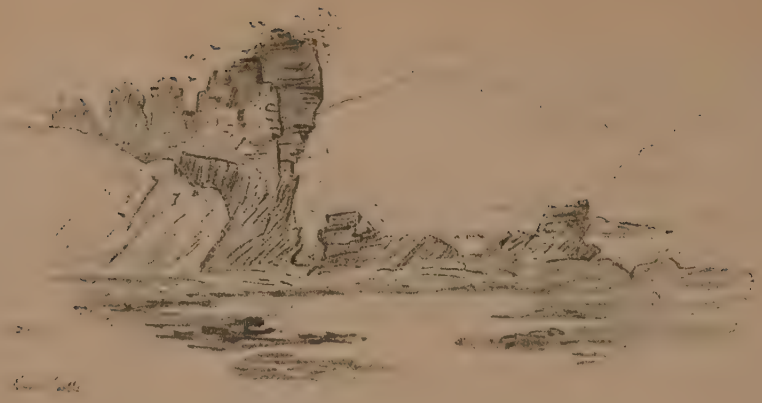
Loch Seaforth (which is the boundary between Lewis and Harris) is in blue shade.

Here, on the slopes of Trotternish, a lamb bleats. The waves murmur drowsily upon Scour Bay. Sea-gulls call. From a hillside of stunted birch a wandering cuckoo chimes her bells.

A heather linnet mounts into the air in song. On the fields beside the shore the young grass is emerald. Upon the brown soil the oats are faintly green. Dust lies thick upon the road, for no rain has fallen for weeks.

The sun sets. Twilight deepens. The people are back at their homes, tired and contented after their day's work. The cows are milked. The evening's labours before the Sabbath rest are completed. Suddenly the Scalpay light across the Minch flashes—once, twice, thrice. The black smoke of a passing steamer lies on the horizon. At midnight the afterglow creeps northward beyond the hills of Harris.

Another day at the peats has come and gone.



AN ANCIENT FORT OF SKYE

ALONG the north-west coast of the Isle of Skye are a number of ancient ruined forts. Duntulm or Dun Tuilm, Dun Bornaskitag, Dun Liath, Dun Scudaburgh, Dun Hallin in Vaternish—all these were members of a great chain of fortifications that encircled the island.

One use of these forts was to warn the neighbourhood of the approach of an enemy. It is possible that they were built by the Vikings who took possession of the Isle of Skye in the ninth century (the island was at length ceded to Norway in 1098, and was restored to Scotland in 1266), but they may date from the early days of the Norse invasion, and were perhaps used by the Celtic population to warn their neighbours of the dreaded galleys of the Norsemen who so often brought destruction to man, beast, and crop in their imperious wake.

Of the Trotternish forts, Dun Liath (a *dun* with at least four galleries) is one of the most interesting. Like Duntulm, it is built upon the edge of a cliff. Immediately below it the waves roll in, and as they recede suck back the rounded

stones with a deep thunderous roar. At Dun Liath dark pillars of basalt rise from the waves, and after a winter storm tangle stems, frondless and battered, lie at the margin of the tide below that agêd *dun*.

Beside Dun Liath a small hill rises. Low as it is, one can see far across Trotternish from its windy crown. South is the basin of Loch Chaluim Chille. In vol. xiv of the *New Statistical Account* it is mentioned that the draining of this loch was commenced in 1715, under the superintendence of Sir Donald of the War (Domhnall a' Chogaidh), but the Battle of Sheriffmuir in that year put an end to the work. In 1763 the venture was continued, but from neglect in keeping the trenches in repair the loch was allowed to form again. In 1824 the work was commenced anew, and in 1829, just one hundred and fourteen years after the start, the loch was at length drained and its basin converted into excellent arable land.[1]

The account continues: "Until St Columba's lake was drained it was yearly frequented by large flocks of swans, which seldom rested on any other lake in the parish. They appeared on the 25th of October annually, passed the winter on the lake, and remained in all about five months. In autumn, after the lake was drained, they made their appearance at the usual time, but on observing the destruction of their usual favourite haunt they hovered with a cry of sadness for a brief period over it, then disappeared, and have seldom been seen since near the place."

Near the centre of the old loch is a spring which was believed to possess miraculous properties. Then came a day, tradition has it, when the spring was abused. Perhaps

[1] *Cf.* "Trotternish," p. 155.

some passer-by washed his hands in it. Thereupon the waters withdrew, and appeared at a spot a quarter of a mile distant.

Eastward from Dun Liath rises the lonely flat-topped mountain known as Suidhe Fhinn (Fingal's Seat).

From the summit of this hill Fionn, or Fingal, hurled a mighty rock seaward. It fell on the farther shore of Loch Chaluim Chille, 1500 feet below and several miles away. The name of that great boulder is Clach Chraigisgean. The legend is that it crashed down upon a woman who was dishonestly milking a neighbour's cow at the moment, and the proof that the story is true is that, if you are strong enough to roll over the rock, you will find beneath it the cow, the woman, the milking-stool, and the pitcher!

Near Suidhe Fhinn a curious vein of rock climbs the dark precipice that rises from Loch Sneasdal. It is called Garadh na Feinne, the Fingalians' Dyke, and was fashioned by the giants of old, who were fond of building such walls because, as my informant quaintly put it, "they had nothing else to do."

It was a wild winter's afternoon when I stood upon Dun Liath. Northward, across the Minch, the Shiant Isles were luminous in rainbow mist. The sea was inky-blue, and a rain squall drove in towards Camus Mór, where small houses and a mill and kiln cluster beside the sea.

Camus Mór of Trotternish is the home of hardy lobster fishermen who sail to Fladda Chuain and the Ascrib Isles summer and winter. It is a *clachan* far from the main road, always within sound of the sea, and looking west to where the winter sun sinks golden behind Eaval of Uist.

A little knoll rises beside the shore at Camus Mór. It is

called Cnoc an Lìn, or the Knoll of the Flax. Here the flax was dried in the days when linen was made in northern Skye.

Beyond the north shore of Camus Mór is Cnoc na h-Aire, or the Watchman's Hill, and close to it rises the ruined fort, Dun Bornaskitag.

Below the *dun* is a spot known as Totagan nan Druinich. The *Druineach* are believed to have been an early race who inhabited small, round, stone houses containing only one person. Saint Columba, it is said, employed these people of small stature in embroidering the vestments of the early pillars of the Christian Church.

Farther along the coast of Skye—beyond Scour Bay, where a treasure-laden ship of France was wrecked a century ago—the dark ruins of Duntulm rise against the sky.

The shores of Scour Bay (or Loch Scuir, as it is sometimes called) are strewn with great boulders that lie in wild confusion, and it is amongst these boulders that some of the treasure from the wrecked vessel lies buried. But the rocks are too huge to be lifted, and would have tried the strength even of that renowned strong man, Martin a' Bhealaich, whose "lift" I have mentioned in the chapter "A Day at the Peats."

From Dun Liath of the unfettered seas it is not a far cry to the Cave of Gold. Into that cave one of the MacArthurs marched, piping. Farther and farther he penetrated its black recesses. He played alone: the cave was the haunt of a dread beast, so none dared accompany him. But his friends kept pace with him above the ground, and they heard the call of his pipe far beneath them until the notes ended, and they knew that he was overcome by the

monster. The present post office at Kilmuir stands above the spot where he fell.

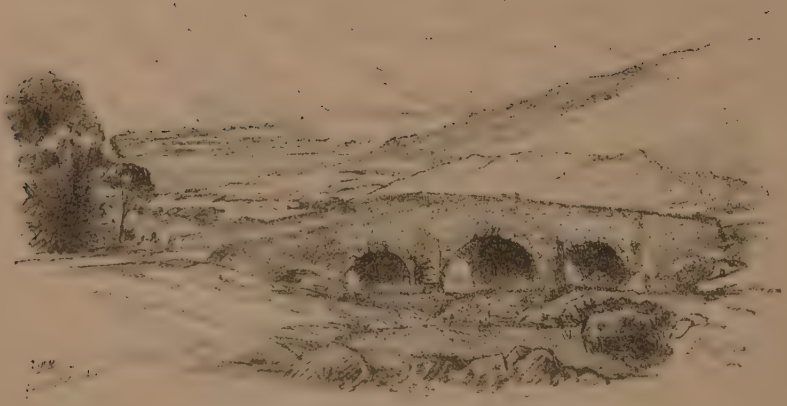
It was beside the Cave of Gold that the race for Skye between MacLeod and MacDonald ended. According to the Trotternish version of that many-versioned story, MacDonald, as his galley neared the Cave of Gold, fearlessly severed his left hand, and, casting it ashore ahead of him, created the honourable motto of the clan, "Air muir 's air tìr" (On sea and on land).

A short distance from Dun Liath are the ruins of a township, Knockow by name, which formerly supplied the country with many fine soldiers. Here was born Donald Roy MacDonald, whose mission to Fladda Chuain to search for Prince Charlie is mentioned in another chapter. There is a local tradition that the press-gang took from Knockow the father of Marshal MacMahon, the great French leader.

Near here the rough pasture-land is furrowed by a thunderbolt. This thunderbolt was foretold by Coinneach Odhar, who also foretold the draining of Loch Chaluim Chille. Skye tradition avers that this Coinneach Odhar was a different person to the more widely known Brahan Seer of the same name and lived at a considerably earlier date.

The brown hill pasture bent before the gale this winter's day, but at sunset came a brief spell of quietness, and the moon, climbing slowly above Suidhe Fhinn, lighted the crests of the waves as the last of the glow faded from the western sky. That night there was a continual feast of colour in the heavens. The moon was often hidden, but as I passed beside Scour Bay her rays were playing upon an advancing hail squall so that it shone bright as the aurora upon the northern horizon. Even as I watched the squall,

a wide lunar rainbow appeared over the dark sea. The colours of that bow were pale toward the zenith, but glowed with warmth where they touched the restless waters. A lunar rainbow is ever a mysterious thing; to-night, in surroundings so wild, it compelled admiration. In that cloud of rainbow mist each colour was so faint that the eye could discern the shades with difficulty. The bow increased in power, then paled once more as the lances of the hail arrived, and the Scalpay light was dimmed by the fierce storm that harried the sea and the rocks where ravens roost.



THE LAST VOYAGE OF IAIN GARBH:

A TALE OF TROTTERNISH

THREE hundred years ago, one Easter Monday, Iain Garbh Mac 'Ille Chaluim, MacLeod of Raasay, set sail south from Stornoway in his *birlinn*, or galley.

He had been, we are told, on a visit to his uncle, and when he left Lewis the weather was ominous, so that one at least of the galley's crew was reluctant to sail in her. The chieftain taunted him on his cowardice, and at the last moment the man sprang on board, saying, "Very well, Iain Garbh, I will drown with you."

The young chieftain was just twenty-one years of age. He was the tallest and most distinguished man of his time, renowned for his strength and his utter fearlessness. That is why he sailed for Raasay across the sea in a breeze that was strong enough to fill the hearts of his seamen with doubt, even with dismay.

Now let us, for a time, leave the galley and her crew and

piper and visit a *clachan* at Staffin, on the north-east coast of Skye. In one of the houses of Staffin lived a *cailleach* who had the reputation of being a witch. She was foster-mother to MacDonald, who had a grudge against young Iain Garbh and desired his destruction. MacDonald therefore crossed to Staffin from his castle at Duntulm and visited the witch of Staffin in her wee house, promising her much land if she "removed" the laird of Raasay.

The *cailleach* sensed by her magic that Iain Garbh had sailed from the Long Island, and she now brewed a pot of secret herbs, and as she stirred the pot she uttered incantations and invoked the spirit of the storm.

The wind increased. Green windows appeared in the lowering sky. Small flurries of spindrift played upon the leaden waters. The men of Staffin and Duntulm anxiously sought the shore, and placed large stones in their boats so that the expected tempest should not lift them.

The pot boiled more furiously. With frenzied cries the witch called upon the elements, and, as she called, her high-pitched quavering voice was lost in the fury of the storm that had risen to her bidding.

Now let us return to the galley. With sails reefed the craft was running before the gale. Iain Garbh, cool and collected as ever, soon realised that it would be impossible to make Raasay in the fury of the increasing tempest. The *birlinn* drove on. Now it was abreast of Fladda Chuain, where, in the tidal river known as Amhuinn a' Bhuird, a fearsome sea was running; now it was passing Iasgair, and the ravens of that isle were gliding, with deep croakings, low above the doomed men.

The green waves were sweeping the galley mercilessly

now. Lower and lower she rode in the water, her sails torn, her crew ceaselessly bailing her. At last, when off a wild shore of Trotternish that is known as Mol Fada na Dubh Airde (the Long Beach of the Black Height), the *birlinn* foundered in a vortex of spindrift at the very moment when the image of the galley that the witch of Staffin had fashioned with her hands foundered in her wildly boiling pot.

When the news of the disaster reached Skye and the Isle of Raasay there was widespread sorrow, for Iain Garbh was beloved by all. Padruig Mór MacCrimmon loosed his grief in that splendid *pìobaireachd*, "The Lament for Iain Garbh of Raasay," and Mary MacLeod [1] made some verses of much beauty on his tragic end. The poem commences:

"Se do ghuala bha làidir
Ge do sharaich a' mhuir i."
("It was your shoulder that was strong
But the sea tired it out.")

In the contemporary Wardlow MSS. a vivid description is given of that Easter Monday disaster.

"This April," says the old writer (his name is not known to us), "the Earle of Seaforth dwelling in the Lewes a dreedful accident happened. His lady being brought to bed there, the Earle sent for John Garve M'kleud, Laird of Rarzay, to witness the christning; and, after the treat and solemnity of the feast, Rarsay takes leave to goe home, and, after a rant of drinking uppon the shoare, went aboord off his birling, and sailed away with a strong north gale off wind: and whither by giveing too much saile and no ballast, or the unskillfullness of the seamen, or that they could not mannage the strong Dutch canvas saile, the boat whelmd,

[1] See p. 141.

and all the men dround in view of the cost. The Laird and 16 of his kinsmen, the prime, perished; non of them ever found; a grewhound or two cast ashoare dead; and pieces of the birling. One Alexander Mackleod in Lewes the night before had voice warning him thrice not to goe with Rarsey, for all would drown in there return; yet he went with him being infatuat and drownd with the rest."

One winter's afternoon, as I stood at the margin of Mol Fada na Dubh Airde, it was easy to visualise the passing of MacLeod of Raasay and all his crew. It was wild weather from the north-west, and the uncurbed wind, blowing straight across from Harris, was troubling the Minch. The seas were breaking white, and in quick succession, upon the large rounded stones of the *mol*, although they have never since that far-off day reached the boulders which they hurled so far inland that memorable Easter Monday.

Black squalls advanced apace across the tumultuous waves. The Ascrib Islands were dark against the shadows of Vaternish Point. The sea was deserted. Then, from the lee of the Ascribs, a boat was seen to sail out into the open water and steer for Camus Mór, a small fishing village below Kilmuir of Trotternish.[1] The flood-tide was with the boat. The wind, blowing with the force of half a gale, urged her forward at speed. She lurched and dived, throwing the water impatiently from her bows. From time to time the white-maned racing waves covered her with spray. Very small did she look in that angry sea (my companion scarce dared look at her), and her presence vividly called to mind the vision of the doomed galley of three centuries ago, driven onward by seas heavier by far, and gradually sinking as each succeeding wave broke inexorably aboard of her.

[1] See p. 166.

DUNTULM

ON the north-western shore of the Isle of Skye stands the ruined castle of Duntulm, the ancient fortress-home of the MacDonalds of the Isles. Duntulm, translated into English, is the Fort of the Island; it is built upon a rocky headland that rises sheer from the green, restless waters of the Minch, and looks across its island and the sea to Harris of the many hills.

From the old castle of Duntulm is a view as fine as any in all Scotland. One November day stands out in my memory. After a spell of summer-like weather, winter without warning descended upon the Atlantic coast. At sunrise the island of Harris stood out across the Minch like some polar isle. There was snow from the edge of the tide to the summit of lonely Clisham.

Across this snowy land a soft flush slowly spread. It crossed the Sound of Harris and rested upon the cone of Eaval of North Uist which rose on the distant western horizon. Towering snow clouds reflected the ruddy glow of the early sun from their billowy depths; here and there

the clouds poured out delicately tinted showers of snow and hail to the sea below.

The castle of Duntulm and the castle of Dunscaith in the south of Skye are, so tradition relates, of fairy origin. Both castles grew with miraculous speed in a single night, fashioned by innumerable tiny hands; by sunrise they were completed and the builders had retired to their *sithean*, or underground dwellings.

If we discard the fairy origin of this castle and turn to historical records we find that Duntulm was apparently first a *dun*, or fortified dwelling, forming one of the chain of *duns* which stretch all along the north coast of Skye, each one being visible to its neighbour on either side. On the Norse invasion of the Isles the castle that is now Duntulm became the residence of one of the most powerful of the Vikings, and was called after him—Dun Daibhidh, or David's Fort. On the ruins of this fort a castle is said to have been built about 1485 by one Angus, Master of the Isles, but the MacLeods of Dunvegan, being in Trotternish before the MacDonalds, may have inhabited Duntulm before 1485. During the early part of the sixteenth century Duntulm changed hands more than once, but was held chiefly by the MacDonalds. In the year 1547 Donald Gorm, one of the MacDonalds of Sleat, was in possession, but the MacDonalds do not seem to have been firmly established in Duntulm until the seventeenth century. It was, therefore, curious that they should, when in undisputed possession, have abandoned the castle about 1730 in favour of Mugstod, or Monkstadt, about six miles southward along the coast. They later built the castle at Armadale, which is to this day the residence of the MacDonalds of Sleat.

The garden of Duntulm had a romantic origin. It was made from soil brought from seven different kingdoms—England, Ireland, Norway, France, Spain, Germany, and Denmark. One can imagine the laden galleys entering the little bay below the castle, sheltered by Tulm Island, and the crews leaping ashore to narrate to their friends and relations the wonderful sights they had seen in the strange lands they had visited. When the tide was low the galleys were drawn up to their resting-place across the smooth rock that forms the shore here. In time the friction of their keels on the rock formed a groove, which gradually became deeper. At the present day two such grooves are seen, running close beside, and parallel to, one another. Above the tide-mark a deep shelter cut out of the solid rock shows the resting-place of the galleys, and is now used by the local fishermen for storing their boats.

Around Duntulm linger many legends of the Mac-Donalds. Here is one of them, told me by a peat fire on a day of sun and driving snow squalls.

There once lived on the Braes of Portree one Teug Mór MacCuin. Teug was the second man in all Skye, coming after MacDonald himself. One day the son of MacLeod of Harris in his twelve-oared galley crossed the Minch and, landing on the shore of Loch Snizort, marched to the country of Teug to lift his cattle. Now Teug was from home, and all his men were with him, so that the MacLeods found none to oppose them. They ate and drank their fill, and feeling secure lay beside the fire and fell fast asleep.

On his return home that night Teug Mór found them thus, and with his sword severed the head of each man in turn, and finally the head of their leader, the son of MacLeod

Cutting Peats

of Harris. Now Teug was on fairly good terms with MacDonald at Duntulm, and it happened a few days later that he was MacDonald's guest. One fine day the look-out spied from the castle the galley of MacLeod of Harris sailing across the blue waters of the Minch. It was the custom in those days that the galley of the visiting chief should be gaily dressed with flags as a token of friendship. Imagine the surprise of MacDonald when he saw the *birlinn* approach without a single flag being shown. Said MacDonald to Teug Mór, "What has come over MacLeod that he should sail to visit me thus?" Teug knew in his heart, yet said not a word.

They had not long to wait. Scarcely had the galley grounded at the beach below the castle when MacLeod sprang ashore and cried out to MacDonald, that if anyone could tell him who had slain his son he would give the whole world to him. Teug thereupon went forward fearlessly, and holding out his hand, said, "Here, MacLeod, is the hand that killed your son." With that MacLeod, with never a word, sprang again into his galley and returned to Harris.

MacDonald of the Isles, who was a close friend of MacLeod of Harris, was greatly distressed and angered that Teug should have killed the son of his neighbour. So at the first opportunity he took aside the body-servant of Teug, and said that if he should bring to him his master's head he would grant him his wish. In time Teug, his visit to MacDonald at an end, left Duntulm and set out for the Braes of Portree. When they had reached the well at Cuidreach, Teug Mór lay down to drink, and quick as thought the treacherous servant severed his head with his master's

sword. The head he wrapped in his plaid and carried back to Duntulm. He asked at the castle for MacDonald, and when he was shown into the presence of the chief triumphantly displayed the head of his master and asked for his promised reward. But MacDonald now bitterly reproached himself on the death of his friend and sent the fellow about his business.

Here is another story of Duntulm. One of the chiefs from the mainland near Kyle, perhaps MacKenzie of Kintail, had crossed to Skye and was lifting the cattle. From Flodigarry news was brought to Duntulm that the cattle were being harried. But the chief and all his men were away in Harris on a raid of their own, and MacDonald's lady alone was at home. The herd who gave the alarm asked her to lend him the chief's bow and arrows, and assured her that single-handed he would keep off the raiders. Thus armed, the herdsman, who was swift of foot, quickly came up with the hostile clan and, concealing himself cunningly, picked off the men one after another with his bow and arrows. After a time the strangers took to flight, but their unseen assailant continued to shoot them down with deadly accuracy, until at a burn between Duntulm and Uig he caught up the sole survivor. This man pleaded for mercy, since he alone was left, and the bowman let him go. From that day to this the burn has been called Lòn Singilte, the Stream of the Single Man. When the herd returned to Duntulm MacDonald's lady was overjoyed at the tidings he brought, and bade him ask any favour of her. All the man asked was to be allowed to change his name, which was MacBhaird, to MacDonald.

Those were stern days. Beside the castle rises Cnoc a'

Rola—in English, the Hill of the Rolling. To this hill were taken the culprits who had been judged by the chief—in whose hands was the power of life and death—upon Cnoc an Ceartais, the Knoll of Justice, and in nail-studded barrels were rolled down this hill. If they miraculously survived this torture they were held free of guilt.

Near the Knoll of Justice is the Hanging Knoll, and one can imagine the terrified victims being dragged thither to their doom. There is a story that when the gallows was first set up here the chief and his men were standing round it in admiration. Someone, half in jest, remarked that it was a pity the gallows could not be tested. At that moment an old man was seen approaching. He was sent for, and came eagerly, for he considered it an honour to be called before the chief. But when he came up he was seized and hanged, and all present were delighted to see how well their new grim contrivance worked!

The dungeons of the castle are now choked with earth and stones. Could they but speak they might tell grim tales of the old days. Here perished Uisdean,[1] or Hugh, a kinsman of Donald Gorm Mór, chief of Sleat. He was known as Uisdean Mac Ghilleaspuig Chleirich, his title of *cléireach*, or "clerk," having been given him because at that time—1580—few in the West Highlands were able to write, and Uisdean was of that select company. Donald Gorm had no heir, and Uisdean wished to gain possession of the property, which would go to his elder brother on the death of Donald Gorm. Uisdean therefore formed a conspiracy to kill Donald. The plot was to be carried out at a great feast that Uisdean proposed to give on the completion of

[1] See p. 157.

his castle (Caisteal Uisdein, on Loch Snizort, about twelve miles south of Duntulm).

When all was ready Uisdean sent a cunning letter to his uncle and chief. In it he bade him affectionately to the feast, at the same time imploring his forgiveness for past misdeeds. The same day he wrote a letter to one of the Martins of Trotternish, giving details of his scheme to kill Donald Gorm and asking for Martin's help. By a remarkable oversight he placed this damning letter in the packet addressed to Donald Gorm, who had him seized by his kinsman in North Uist, Donald MacIain 'ic Sheumais. When Uisdean saw his enemies coming he attempted to escape by disguising himself in female attire and grinding corn, but his large size and powerful appearance betrayed him. He was cast into the dungeon[1] and was starved for some days. Then a large portion of salt beef was lowered to him. This he ate greedily and was soon tormented with thirst. A jug of salt water was next given to the unfortunate man. It is said that he died in madness, having torn to pieces with his teeth the pewter dish which had held the beef. His body was taken to the burial-ground at Kilmuir, but some say that it was left on the surface for the ravens and gulls to feast upon. Certainly his bones and skull were on the surface of the graveyard until the early part of the nineteenth century.

The glory of Duntulm has faded and romance is left in its place. No longer do the MacArthurs, hereditary pipers to the MacDonalds, discourse *ceòl mór* on the Highland pipe. Nor do the MacVurichs, hereditary bards, sing of deeds of valour of the chiefs. No longer do the hereditary

[1] At Duntulm.

Duntulm Castle, from a print after the painting by Daniels

harpers make soft music within the castle halls. No longer do the MacRurys, hereditary smiths and armourers, forge the gleaming broadsword and trusty shield. All these are gone, but in the arch of one of the windows of the castle is still to be seen the rough drawing of a galley scratched with some sharp instrument in the mortar—a vivid reminder of the old days.

As of old the rising sun bathes the castle walls with a soft warm glow, and of an autumn night the new moon, so slender as to be almost invisible, slips imperceptibly below Vaternish Point. Beneath the castle solans pass now, as they did then, upon white wings, and kittiwakes call of a summer night from the grassy isle that rises from the bay.

Of this island Dean Munro, High Dean of the Western Isles, wrote in 1549: ". . . lyes an ile callit Ellan Tuilin, haffe mile lairge or thereby, manurit, good for corn and store, pertaining to Donald Gormsone." I quote the old account, because no corn has been grown upon Eilean Tuilm (or Holm Island as it is sometimes written on old maps) since the MacDonalds of the Isles left their castle of Duntulm over two hundred years ago.

The sea and the hills are unchanging. Eaval as of old rises blue from the pearly waters of the Minch on a summer evening, and the last golden light of the sun burns behind Clisham of Harris. So it was when the people of the castle looked out to watch the sun set over the Minch or the pale aurora blaze with greenish light; so it will be when the last stone of this ancient fortress has fallen, and nothing is left to tell of its stern history except perhaps an eerie shout on nights of rain and furious wind when the spirits of forgotten far-off things are abroad.

A HARVEST DAY IN TROTTERNISH

A BLUE and tranquil sea. From its deeps rise Iasgair and Fladda, golden in autumn sunshine. The ruined castle of Duntulm throws its dark shadows far across the awakening waters. Sea-gulls call, rock-pigeons fly swiftly overhead.

The whistle of a curlew follows close upon the croak of a wandering raven.

In the fields the oats are ripe. Some of the corn has already been reaped, but there remains much to be cut, and as the sun's rays dispel the morning dew the people leave their small houses for a day's work in the field.

In Trotternish most of the oats are reaped with the scythe, but the old sickle or hook is still used. Everything is done by hand. The people work in family parties. The men are skilled in the use of the scythe, and while they reap the women bind the oats into sheaves. The work is arduous, and even in October the sun's rays are warm on a windless noon. Larks mount into the air as at spring-time; the song of the corn-bunting is still heard. Steadily the reapers work. Across the standing oats the corn

marigold spreads a film of orange; the meadow vetchling still shows its blue flowers.

The time for the midday meal approaches. The harvesters seat themselves upon the grass. The ocean is now a deep blue. Upon the shore small waves break. The tide is low. Forests of tangle seaweed emerge from the water. As the gentle northerly swell caresses them they roll and sway. The hills of Lewis and Harris rise blue across the sea. Across by Sgeir nam Maol a yacht sails. She is entirely white; she gives the illusion of a phantom ship.

Beneath the harvest-field a solan flies. Without pause his keen eye searches the sea. More than once he apparently sees a fish, and with powerful wing-thrusts increases the speed of his seaward plunge. But each time, at the last moment, the fisherman checks his fall, for the fish must have observed his menacing shadow and swum to greater depths.

The last of the oats have been reaped, and now the last of the hay harvest must be secured. The small field of hay is beneath Duntulm Castle. This field was formerly the garden of the old castle, and the soil that was brought overseas from seven kingdoms retains its virtue. And so the hay crop is a heavy one, and the hay, well dried the previous day by a strong easterly gale which threatened to blow it out into the Minch, is in fine condition for the stackyard.

Beside the field rises Cnoc an Ceartais, the Knoll of Justice, where MacDonald of the Isles judged the disputes between his clansmen.[1] Across the blue waters of Duntulm Bay are seen the ruins of the little crofting township of Erisco, whose inmates were obliged to find homes else-

[1] See p. 179.

where when the lands of Duntulm became a large sheep-farm. Although the castle has been abandoned for two hundred years, there was living in the neighbouring village of Conista not long ago an old lady who remembered hearing from her father that when a boy he saw from his father's croft at Erisco the lights burning in the windows of Duntulm Castle.

The abandoning of the old castle, without any apparent cause, has always been a mysterious affair. It was common talk among the old people that the place was haunted by Donald Gorm, who was mortally wounded in the thigh by an arrow while besieging the castle of Eilean Donnan in the year 1540. The spectre of this chief (he who starved to death his kinsman, Hugh the Clerk, in a dungeon at Duntulm) was so persistent and unpleasant a visitor to the castle that the family at last abandoned the place. Another tradition tells us that a child fell from the castle window over the cliff into the sea, and because of this the MacDonalds took such a dislike to Duntulm that they left it.

But the spectre of Donald Gorm is now but a dim memory, and scarcely that when the sun shines upon land and sea, and the ruins of Duntulm are austere no longer but full of friendliness.

The hay is raked up. A cart, balanced insecurely on the steep slope, is quickly filled, and journey after journey is made to the small thatched cottage beneath Cnoc an Ceartais. Near the wee house, almost hidden by its peat-stack, its hay-stacks, and its corn-stacks, are many flowers. The bell-heather still blossoms, close pressed to the ground, and knapweed, scabious, and clover are near it.

Upon Scour Bay the westering sun shines so that the

wavelets are silvered. Herring-drifters pass north; a trawler steers south.

A neighbour has completed his harvesting. His stacks rise sturdy and well built. They are thatched with reeds, rushes, and the leaves of the yellow iris. The stacks are roped, and the ropes are held in position by large stones which hang suspended around the stack. These stones are to steady the stack during a winter gale.

Since the harvest is ended, at night there is the old observance of drinking the *stapag*. It is a dish of thick churned cream, into which oatmeal has been dropped. The small room is clean and cosy. A peat fire burns brightly. The crofter and his wife are charming hosts. She is refined and gentle-voiced. He is the best type of islesman—strong, self-reliant, and courteous. Two pipers play in turn while the *stapag* is being drunk, and over the sea darkness changes to night as the moon, golden and full-orbed, rises in the east. From the bay shine the lights of a herring-drifter lying at her nets; perhaps her crew hear the music of the pipe and wonder whence it comes. Low on the horizon is Jupiter, large and bright. The pale fingers of the Northern Lights flicker, quiver, wax, and wane above the Shiant Isles and the hills of Lewis. From the shore come the sound of the swell upon the rocks and the herring that play upon the surface of moonlit waters.

Old harvest customs linger in Trotternish. There is the fashioning of the *Maighdean Bhuana*, the Reaping Maiden. She is made of the last handful of oats cut by the sickle, and is sometimes present at the drinking of the *stapag*.

The *Gobhar Bhacach*, or Crooked Goat, was formerly

made. This consisted of a few ears of corn, knotted and twisted, which were thrown by an enemy into the field of his neighbour secretly. And so to find the *Gobhar Bhacach* lying amongst the oats when the field was being reaped was an unlucky thing.

In the old days, when the ground was dug by the *cas chrom*, the harvest was later than it is now.

A few days before the Feast of Saint Michael the oats around the edges of the lazy beds (*iomairean*), being lighter in growth and therefore riper, were plucked by the hand. The grain threshed from this corn by the flail was slowly roasted in an iron pot over the peat fire and afterwards ground by the quern. The meal was then made into a bannock called *Struthan Mhicheil*, and this bannock was eaten on Michaelmas Day.

Thus with old rites the people of Trotternish prepare for winter while summer yet lingers beside the Minch. But the morning is not far distant when the shapely summit of Slioch, beside Loch Maree across the sea, will wear its first transient cloak of snow, and barnacle geese, flying down from Greenland's shores, will give warning to Eilean a' Cheò that winter comes.

IASGAIR: AN ISLE OF THE MINCH

THE traveller along the high-road that leads northward from Kilmuir to Duntulm sees with pleasure a small and shapely rocky isle rising from the blue waters of the Minch.

The name of the island is An t-Iasgair, which may mean the Fisherman, but more probably signifies the Fish Rock. It is a lonely isle, visited by few. The lythe or pollack are not sufficiently plentiful around it to tempt the boats of Duntulm thus far, and the lobster fishermen of Camus Mór do not set their creels here. Thus the sea-fowl, and a few old grey seals, have the isle to themselves.

It is told in Trotternish that the British fleet was steaming northward through the Minch one summer's day a few years before the Great War. When abreast of Iasgair the leading vessel fired a broadside at the isle. Each battleship as she passed did likewise, so that much of the rock was blown away, and next day the island was considerably smaller.

During the summer months Iasgair is the home of many

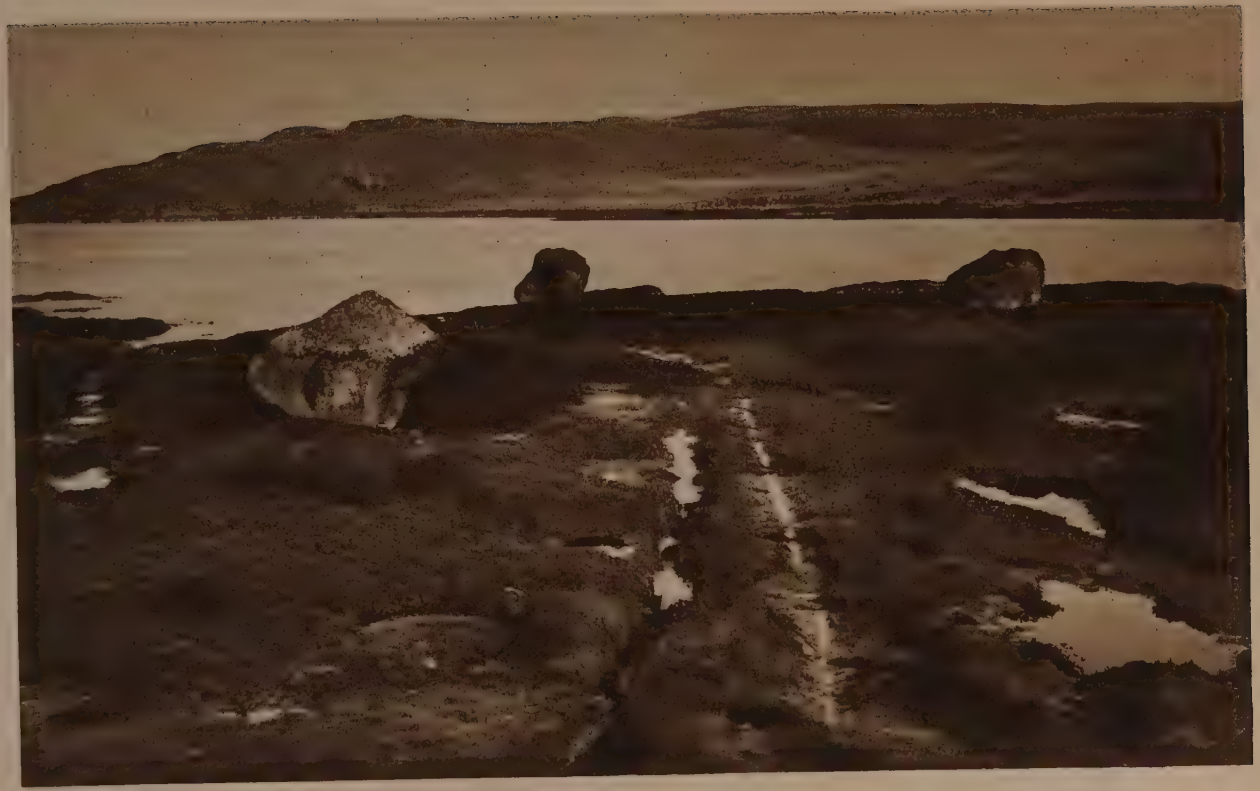
kittiwake gulls and puffins. One August morning when we sailed out to the island we could see, while still a considerable distance away, a cloud of puffins circling about the isle. As we approached the rock the birds stood beside their burrows, their white breasts showing clearly against the dark peaty soil. Amongst the puffins was the sinister figure of a large herring gull, and, even as we watched him, he pounced upon an unfortunate puffin and doubtless made a meal of it there and then.

It is on the eastern slope of Iasgair that the puffins, or sea-parrots, have their home; the western face of the isle is a sheer cliff, of no great height, and here a considerable colony of kittiwakes nest. It is difficult to mistake a kittiwake colony; the birds tell their name to all the world ("kitti-wāke! kitti-wāke!") in querulous and unmistakable language, by night as well as by day.

It is always pleasant to anchor in the small rock-girt harbour of Iasgair and hear the voices of the kittiwakes.

No birds are more affectionate. Towards their mates they are full of consideration. They have a great love for their nests, even if their young should have been lost, and will stand motionless upon an empty nest hour after hour. In early July the young kittiwakes are hatched. In the golden stillness of a July afternoon the mother broods her young family. After a time she is seen to be gently agitated from below, and the head of a downy chick is thrust out from beneath her feathers. Feebly but persistently the baby taps upon its mother's bill, and after a time the parent feeds it with a morsel of half-digested fish, which she is able to eject without apparent effort.

The kittiwake gull is gentleness personified. It is fear-



Grooves along which galleys of the MacDonalds of the Isles were launched from Duntulm Castle

less, and will approach a boat at anchor more closely than any other sea-bird and alight upon the water a few feet from it. But it is delicate, and the continuous storms of July 1928 were disastrous to the young kittiwakes. No single young bird upon Tulm Island, and few upon Iasgair, survived these unusual summer storms.

Guillemots and razorbills also nest upon Iasgair. The guillemots lay on ledges of rock, the razorbills beneath stones and boulders. In the arch of a cave where rock-doves flit, guillemots grunt and groan curiously as they peer down upon the intruder, and the high piercing cries of young shags increase the medley of sound. A curious fate befell a shag one spring upon Iasgair. The bird, perhaps when asleep, slipped from its perch, and in some way its head during its fall became wedged between two stones. When I saw it the shag had been dead some time, and its body hung suspended by the head, high above the sea, and swayed with the wind like some malefactor upon the gibbet. It is curious that the shag, or green cormorant, should be the only member of its tribe to nest upon the isles of Trotternish, but its cousin, the true cormorant—a bird of considerably larger size,—arrives at Iasgair before August is over. Than the shag the cormorant is a wilder bird by far, and takes flight before a boat draws near its perch.

When the sea-birds have reared their young they leave the isle, and in October Iasgair is a silent place. But not altogether silent, for the long northerly swell that sweeps the Minch makes music here. Whence come these waves that break in grey spray high upon the small isle in their path? Their origin may be beyond The Faeroes, perhaps

upon the ice-set Greenland Ocean above which the aurora flickers. With those far-travelled waves come grey clouds and stinging showers of hail and rain that beat upon the smooth rocks, while in the tidal rivers that stream past Iasgair white waves leap tumultuously.

But on the October day that has just merged into a dusk of mellow moonlight as I pen these lines, the Minch was calm as the smallest tidal pool. Even at sunrise the air was warm, and for long I watched a solan sailing above the little bay of Duntulm. Like a drifting shadow it moved backwards and forwards against the sunlit haze. Now it flew high, now stooped low, as a fishing shag attracted its notice. Once, in full flight, the keen-eyed fisherman saw a fish. Without a moment's pause the solan in a headlong rush crashed into the water. So swift and reckless a dive I have never before seen, yet the bird in a few seconds emerged cheerfully on the surface, and as it rose threw a troubled pathway across a windless sea.

It is rare for the ocean to sleep in October, but to-day, in the warm and silent air, it seemed to dream. On the horizon it was difficult to see the dividing line between sky and water. The climbing sun, shining upon the haze, suffused it with gold.

There was no wind to fill the sail to-day, but on the passage to Iasgair the ebb-tide was favourable, and the row across the smiling sea was all the more delightful because one realised that such halcyon days must be few before the winter storms set in. The puffins had gone. The kittiwakes which had nested upon Iasgair had flown south, and perhaps even now were passing above the Bay of Biscay. Even the solans, last of all summer sea-birds to leave the

waters of Skye, were less numerous than a week before. Their young on distant St Kilda were departing from the parental rock, and the parents were leaving the summer fishing grounds as the herring and mackerel moved off into deeper water.

Ahead of us lay Iasgair in pale haze. Northward Fladda Chuain was golden; through the haze it seemed a distant nebulous isle, although in reality it was close at hand.

The strong ebb-tide bore us quickly toward Iasgair. The isle cleft the tidal stream in its journey south. With a swirl of foam the divided waters, impatient of delay, hurried onwards toward Vaternish and Neist. The grass upon the crown of the island was still a brilliant green; it contrasted strikingly with the brown hill-slopes of Trotternish that rose beyond the intervening miles of sea. Shags and cormorants, clustered upon rocky ledges, eyed our boat curiously, and on the sea-wrack turnstones fed.

Landing on Iasgair is difficult always, for the rock rises almost sheer from the green depths of the sea, and when the northerly swell rolls in the isle is inaccessible.

Almost joined to Iasgair is a lesser isle, Dubh Sgeir by name. It is gently sloping, and its formation resembles that of the celebrated Fingal's Cave on Staffa. On August days, when the hills of Harris and Uist rise blue as the ocean itself on the western horizon, Dubh Sgeir is the Black Rock no longer, for it is crowned with a field of sea-daisies, so dense that they glisten in the strong sunlight like new-fallen snow. But in October the last of the flowers has faded and that summer snowfield has gone.

Entangled upon the rocky shore of Iasgair were a herring-drifter's nets. A storm may have swept them here; they

lay in the path of the tide, the buoys riding easily upon the sunlit waters.

Becalmed upon that tranquil sea a sailing vessel was borne inexorably backwards by the tide although her sails were fully set. Hour after hour she drifted there idly as though bespelled.

The sun sank, a dull red ball, and at its setting a chill breeze drifted across from Eilean a' Cheò. From Kilbride it came, from the shingly beach below Monkstad, where, almost two hundred years ago, Flora MacDonald of immortal memory disembarked with Prince Charles Edward after a perilous voyage across from Uist.

On that day the Prince, disguised as a serving maid, remained in hiding beside the shore[1] while Flora sought help from her kinswoman, Lady Margaret MacDonald.

On the evening breeze moths and small insects passed, fluttering, west. They had been carried out to sea, and were now being herded, a helpless company, towards the Outer Isles.

With dusk the hunter's moon rose golden beside Jupiter in the velvet, star-set sky, and shone down upon the dark rock of Iasgair and the hills of Trotternish.

[1] See p. 153.

FLADDA OF THE OCEAN

THE intense sun of a summer noon beats down upon the lonely island group of Fladda Chuain (Fladda of the Ocean) as I pencil these lines, sitting below the tide-mark on rocks where gardens of red sea-anemones blossom in clear, sky-reflecting pools. Innumerable sea-daisies crown the isle on which I sit with a snow-white wave, and their scent mingles with the tang of the sea-weed. Upon the pale, vital ocean a school of dolphins are playing with supreme grace. As they hurl their great symmetrical bulk torpedo-like from the water they hang for the fraction of a second poised between pearly sea and cloud-flecked sky. They fall, and great fountains of glistening spray spout high into the air.

Past me fly puffins in an unending stream. The slopes and summit of the island are honeycombed with their burrows, in each of which crouches, in darkness, the chick that will soon take to the sea, and the parent puffins must needs fish busily in order to satisfy the growing appetites of their families.

Puffins formerly were caught for food on Fladda while brooding their eggs in their burrows. The old people said that when the puffin found himself in great jeopardy and unable to effect his escape, he pushed out his egg to his enemy, calling out in Gaelic, "Fag, fag, fag, na bruth, na bruth!" ("Leave, leave, leave, bruise not, bruise not!"). But now the birds nest undisturbed.

Let the imagination dwell upon the feelings of a young puffin in the darkest hour of an August night, when its parents summon it forth from the only world it has known, and coax it to the surface of the ocean that is scarce visible beyond the line of the shore. Mysteriously, through the darkness, the puffins guide their young out to sea. No human being has ever watched them leave their island; once upon the ocean they are seldom seen.

The puffins must lead their youngsters far out into the Atlantic beyond the sight of land, else they would be visible, like the young of the guillemot and razorbill, during the months of August and September.

But the time has not yet come for the young puffins to take their first great journey, and so their parents, this morning of light airs and warm sunshine, either fly to and fro busily and with a great air of importance, or else swim on the quiet sea and in their curiosity approach me closely. Suddenly there is a commotion among the swimmers, for the dolphins, unperceived, have sped beneath the water to the tidal stream beside the shore, and now rise and blow the sea-water from their nostrils, causing the puffins to flutter, though with little fear, from the surface.

Through a narrow creek, or *geodh*, beside me puffins pass continually. So close to me do they fly that I can feel

the rush of air from their wings, moved at great speed. The sun shines upon their gaily painted bills. Every now and again those birds congregated on the island fly in a body out to sea, make a small excursion sun-wise, then return and alight beside their burrows.

Fladda Chuain is rich in historical associations. On it was formerly a fane or temple. According to the *New Statistical Account of Scotland*, this was supposed to have been built by the Druids, who once a year assembled here to feast and worship. Nine smooth stones, each about a foot in length, were used on Fladda by the Druids in their religious ceremonies. The stones, within the last hundred years, were removed from the isle, and all traces of them have been lost.

When the Christian faith came to the West a chapel, dedicated to Saint Columba, was built upon Fladda Chuain. Even in Martin's time (1700) an altar, on which was a blue stone, remained here.

This stone controlled the winds. It was necessary only to wash it, and then to wish for the desired breeze. At once that breeze could be seen approaching over the waters of the Minch. On the blue stone of Fladda Chuain it was the custom to swear.

On Fladda is Cladh a' Mhanaich, the Monk's Burying Place. Here lies buried the monk O'Gorgon, a great man with a tremendous name. A few years ago some fishermen from Camus Mór were storm-stayed upon Fladda. Their provisions were running short, and when searching for rabbits one of the men found at the entrance to a rabbit hole portions of a large human skull. The jaw-bone, some teeth, and part of the forehead were in good preservation.

These remains were generally believed to belong to the monk O'Gorgon, after which Cladh a' Mhanaich was named.

Some sixty years ago there lived in Kilmaluaig a man called Domhnall a' Ghorgon (Donald of Gorgon). He was supposed to have been of the same family as the monk, and was the postman between Kilmaluaig and Kilmuir. Donald did all his work on foot. His pay was meagre, consisting of a penny from each person for whom he brought a letter. On the shore of Scour Bay stands a large boulder called by the old people Tigh Geamhraidh Dhomhnaill a' Ghorgon, which in English is Donald of Gorgon's Winter House. It was here that Donald used to crouch for shelter when overtaken by some wild shower that swept across from the Outer Isles to the shore of Skye.

The names on Fladda still speak of the early Christian Church. The landing-place on the island is Port an Teampuill, the Port of the Temple, and overlooking the old burying-ground is a rock called Creag na Croise, the Rock of the Cross, where, one infers, the cross of the monastery was displayed. Perhaps because of the influence of Columba no toads, frogs, mice, rats, or snails can live on Fladda. It is said that mice were carried there, but died upon being liberated on the isle (*New Statistical Account of Scotland*, vol. xiv).[1]

Early of a summer's morning in the year 1715 a *birlinn*, or galley, might have been seen to sail out from beneath the castle of Duntulm, in northern Skye, and steer for the island of the Fladda group that is now called Bord Mhic-Dhomhnaill (in English, MacDonald's Table), but which

[1] The saint banished all serpents from Iona, and all fleas.

was formerly named Bord Cruinn, the Round Table. Arriving at the isle (above which puffins doubtless flew in agitated clouds as they fly while I write) certain of the crew of the galley landed, and later might have been seen upon the flat, grassy crown of the isle building a hut. The group of busy workers were Sir Donald MacDonald of the Isles and his men, and the business which brought them there was the concealing of the title-deeds of the chief before Domhnall a' Chogaidh (Donald of the War) embarked upon the dramatic rising of 1715. Perhaps the hills of Harris were as blue then as they are now while I write these lines. Perhaps, as it rises now, Eaval of North Uist rose hazily to steadfast grey skies westward, while northward the Bespelled Isles towered from ocean deeps. Doubtless there was sadness in the hearts of more than one of that little group as they looked upon the scene of quiet, restful beauty, perhaps for the last time. The bravery of the MacDonalds on the field of Sheriffmuir will long be told in the Isles as one of the most inspiring things of the disastrous rising of 1715, and doubtless the thoughts of many of the clansmen in the heat of battle turned to the castle of Duntulm and the grassy isle of Fladda of the Ocean.

The rocky isle guarded the title-deeds well, and after the rising they were recovered and brought back to Duntulm.

So much for Fladda and the rising of 1715.

Later came the affair of 1745, and again Fladda was in the Jacobite eye. After Culloden, when Prince Charlie was in hiding in South Uist, plans were made for him to cross the Minch and find a temporary refuge upon Fladda Chuain, which was then inhabited by one man and his family,

tenants of Sir Alexander MacDonald of the Isles. Sir Alexander himself had sided against the prince, but his talented wife, Lady Margaret, had a friendly feeling toward the royal fugitive, and when she heard of this plan for his safety requested a Highland officer named Donald Roy MacDonald to sail over to Fladda, taking with him six of her husband's shirts and twenty guineas in gold and silver for the Prince's use.

Making the excuse that he was in need of fish and of shells for lime, Donald Roy crossed to Fladda Chuain.

On the main isle he could glean no news of Prince Charles Edward, and accordingly he decided to land upon the smaller and precipitous island then known as Bord Cruinn.

On Bord Cruinn stood the hut beneath which the title-deeds of Sir Donald of the War had been concealed thirty years previously, and Donald Roy, thinking the Prince might be in hiding in the hut, scaled the rock with difficulty (for he was lame). But there was no trace of him whom he sought, and shortly afterwards came the news that the plans for the escape of Prince Charlie had been altered.

As I write the sky is continually changing. Clouds form and dissolve. The breeze veers, backs, drops to the lightest of zephyrs. A solan has just passed me on white wings that drive him powerfully, purposefully low above the sea. This keen-eyed fisherman was steering for the Sound of Harris, twenty miles to the west, and I knew that he was flighting home to Stac an Armin of St Kilda, below the horizon, where thousands of his kind were nesting.

The homing sense of the solan has always seemed to me to be a remarkable thing. Here, off the north-west coast of Skye, we see them steering daily towards St Kilda

during the summer months of the year. That island group is certainly eighty miles distant, and so is invisible even in the clearest weather. How do the birds steer so unerringly to their distant goal on days of mist and storm? One theory —and it is a fascinating one—is that they are in touch with the "group mind" of their fellows which are so densely clustered upon the nesting rock, and through mist and storm are guided back by psychic wireless waves to their distant tribe.

While the solan has scarce disappeared from my view a family of greater black-backed gulls pass high overhead. Their flight is leisurely and undulating; their cries call to mind the clamour of the wild geese that drift down to us in autumn on the north wind.

On a ledge of rock beside me a guillemot is brooding her single chick on the bare cliff. The young bird calls continuously, for it is evidently hungry, and soon what I presume to be the father bird flies in from the sea with a small herring, which he carries apparently wedged far down his throat. The tail of the fish just emerges beyond the tip of his bill. Alighting upon the ledge he at once disgorges his catch, and passes it to the chick which swallows the fish whole, while its mother with drooping wings stands over it protectingly. Then both parents fondle one another with their bills before Mr Guillemot flies out to sea on another fishing expedition. The herring is too large for the young guillemot to swallow in its entirety, and the tail can be seen sticking out of the baby's mouth. Persistently the chick attempts to swallow its dinner more successfully, then at last falls asleep with the herring's tail still visible.

Another fisherman (this time a razorbill) now flies in

from the ocean. His bill is crammed with small herring fry. Then a puffin, likewise burdened, alights at the mouth of his burrow. Near him a pair of his tribe caress one another with their bills for a full five minutes before disappearing together down their nesting burrow. Birds love one another actively not at the season of nesting only.

Upon a skerry stands a greater black-backed gull. The flood-tide, on which is borne a gentle swell from the Atlantic, gradually encroaches upon his islet until he is forced to rise. He flies only a few yards, then alights upon the water.

Grey clouds spread across the sky. North Uist is hidden in thin rain, and showers rest upon the Harris hills. The Minch has assumed a colour of steel-blue that merges in places into pale grey. Nowhere does the sea smile now. Far east, upon Slioch and the other great peaks of Ross-shire, soft, clear sunshine lingers. Each corrie, each rock, the headlong course of each burn, all are distinct.

Blue sky persists above the ocean horizon north-east, where a great thundercloud, primrose in the sun's glow, is piled up. An unending company of sea-fowl—razorbills, guillemots, and puffins—drift past me on the flood, each bird gazing inquiringly upon the unexpected visitor as it passes.

Upon the emerald crown of the isle a bumble-bee is drawing the nectar from the sea-daisies, and near it a pair of twites are feeding upon the seeds of the sorrel that everywhere grows knee-deep.

The last of the breeze has gone, and the mail steamer *Plover*, as she crosses from Skye to Harris, leaves behind her a motionless column of dark smoke that lies upon the air and does not dissolve.

And now, as I finish this chapter, late evening is come.

The hills of Harris showing through an old arch in Duntulm Castle

Pale grey haze lies upon the sea, above which petrels wheel and glide. In the still air is the mutter of distant thunder, and rain in great drops begins to fall. But far to the north the sky remains clear, and the evening sun bathes in pale fire the far-distant hills of Sutherland that rise from the ocean floor.

. . . . . .

It was a long row back from Fladda of the Ocean to Eilean a' Cheò that night, for there was no wind to fill the sail. There was the playing of old pipe tunes in the boat —tunes which the MacCrimmons and the MacArthurs made in the time of Domhnall a' Chogaidh—and at dusk the skiff was drawn up beneath the castle of Duntulm, along the old groove where the galley of Sir Donald MacDonald of the War was launched that summer's day of 1715, when he sailed out towards Fladda with his title-deeds before journeying, we may suppose, to the distant Braes of Mar, where the standard of the Jacobite rising was unfurled one September morning of that momentous year.

It was late October when next I visited Fladda of the Ocean. At sunrise the hills of Harris lay in an aerial bath of purple. Upon Clisham the first snows of autumn lay lightly, so that the whiteness of the hill-top was tinged with grey. A long swell from the north-east swept the Minch, sending the gleaming spray high upon the dark rocks of Hunish. The distant snow-capped peaks of Sutherland showed as our small craft rose on each long wave, and disappeared from view as we fell into the trough between each succeeding sea. Flying swiftly with the breeze flock after flock of guillemots passed south, all fleeing from a northern winter.

Save for these travellers, the sea was deserted, but as we approached Fladda we became aware of a multitude of barnacle geese standing, tier upon tier, on a smooth rocky slope beside the sea. As we sailed toward them many of the geese rose and flew uncertainly this way and that with much clamour, but many more remained, so that the rock seemed to be literally encrusted with them. "Encrusted" may appear a strange word to use when writing of birds, yet the resemblance of the close-ranked geese to barnacles was a striking one, and suggested a simple explanation for a curious name—though an explanation at variance with the old literature on the subject.

The geese were still upon their skerry as we sailed into Port an Teampuill, but the lowering of our sail disturbed them and sent them into the air in a clamorous cloud.

Although the geese were wild, the turnstones that stood beside the landing-place were so confiding that, unmindful of us, they continued busily to turn over the seaweed as they fed.

During the time we were upon their isle the barnacle geese were without rest. They had evidently just arrived from the Arctic, and, since they had not seen man for many months, were resentful at being disturbed. In small companies they flew around. At times they hung, almost motionless, in the breeze, swaying backwards and forwards against the dark columnar rocks. Now they were in shade, now the low October sun shone upon them, and beneath them the sea sparkled as the tidal stream forced its way north against the wind. On the far horizon, behind the wandering geese, rose the many peaks of the Cuillin, with the greyness of distance upon them. Continuously the

geese called. The voices of that wingèd army were in different keys; their wild cries harmonised with the seas that, one after another, flooded the narrow creeks piled high with tangle-weed.

The scene recalled to me vividly the June evening when I approached Spitzbergen (five hundred miles north of the North Cape of Norway) and for the first time saw barnacle geese at their summer haunts. In Spitzbergen the June sun at noon is no higher than the October sun in the Isles. The snowy hills of Sutherland might well have been the peaks of Spitzbergen. The sea was that same blue-green tone beneath a cloudless sky. And yet fifteen hundred miles of ocean lie between Spitzbergen, where the midnight sun shines upon drifting ice-floes, and the little Hebridean isle of Fladda Chuain.

So restless were the barnacle geese of Fladda to-day that they were full of alarms, even when they alighted on the sea. A minute or two only they rested lightly on the water, then rose and shook the salt spray from their handsome plumage. Above the small crested waves they flew uncertainly, and caused annoyance to an old pair of ravens which had hitherto been living in peace.

At the approach of evening, when the sun was bathing the snowy slopes of Slioch and Uist rose from a quivering ocean, we sailed east to Skye. By now the barnacle geese were regaining courage, and again clustered upon the slopes and crown of a small rocky isle. They stood in close-packed rows as puffins do, and new arrivals were ever flying in and alighting, with much hovering and rapid beating of their wings, wherever they could find unoccupied ground.

The sun set angrily behind Uist, and after sundown a

bitter wind from the east arose. Next morning the fair weather was gone. In its place came sleet that whitened the high ground, and a furious gale that swept confused seas upon Fladda.

In imagination I saw the barnacle geese, their feathers drenched with spray, crouching together as they faced the squalls on that unfrequented isle, which would be their home until once more they flighted north to Arctic shores at the coming of May.

TRODDAY: THE FAIRY ISLE

RATHER less than two sea miles from Rudha Hunish, most northerly point of Skye, a large grassy island rises from the ocean. Its name is Trodday, which, if we credit the old traditions, is the Isle of Trolds, or Sprites.

Dr Samuel Johnson, in his *Journey to the Western Islands*, writes: "In Troda, within these three and thirty years, milk was put every Saturday for Greogach, or the Old Man with the Long Beard. Whether Greogach was courted as kind, or dreaded as terrible, whether they meant by giving him milk to obtain good or avert evil I was not informed."

Again, in the *New Statistical Account of Scotland*, vol. xiv, we read that, "Even so late as 1770 the dairymaids who attended a herd of cattle in the Island of Trodda were in the habit of pouring daily a quantity of milk on a hollow stone for the Gruagach. Should they neglect to do so they were sure of feeling the effects of Miss Brownie's wand next

day. The Gruagach was said to be an innocent supernatural visitor, who frisked and gambolled about the pens and folds. She was armed with a pliable reed, with which she switched any who would annoy her."

Thus we may doubt not that Trodday is the Isle of Trolds. But if we should, doubting, desire further proof there is the experience of one who, not so many years ago, passed a night upon Trodday during the lambing season. After dark fell the isle became a place of confused, persistent noises. Through the night these noises continued, and when the lagging dawn at last spread an orange flame across the eastern sky the affrighted shepherd climbed to the highest point of the isle and kindled a fire for a boat, for he affirmed that nothing would induce him to remain a second night upon that haunted island.

Trodday is now uninhabited. The last of the dairymaids has long left it and the Gruagach has the isle to itself.

Many centuries ago a chapel stood upon Trodday. Saint Columba visited this chapel, and the island was at one time called after him—Eilean Chaluim Chille.

I have said that Trodday is now uninhabited. This is, perhaps, scarcely correct, for the island still has its *Bodach* (Old Man) and its *Cailleach* (Old Woman). The Old Man of Trodday is a stack which rises, a tall, dark pillar of rock, near the western end of the isle. The Old Wife is a rock standing a little way from the eastern shore. It is below the surface of the water except at low tide, and the barnacles that cluster upon the head of the Cailleach appear as silver hair through the green depths. Crouching there, half concealed, the Cailleach is a siren who awaits any unsuspecting boat that may approach her too closely. Did she not lure

to their destruction a crew of Skye fishermen whose craft impaled itself upon her head and immediately sank?

On a fine summer's day there are few places more delightful than Trodday. The island grass is long and green. Short-grazed heather mingles its honey scent with the perfume of blue scabious flowers. Blue and clear is the ocean. Sea-gulls scream and wheel, and perchance a gaggle of grey lag geese, visitors from the Outer Isles across the Minch, alight to graze beside a wee pool that lies at the edge of the isle. Across the cliffs, where the northerly swell breaks white, there fly wandering fulmar petrels.

Eastward the hills of the western mainland of Scotland rise. Slioch, An Teallach, the Sugar Loaf beside distant Loch Inver, the conical peaks that stand near Scourie, all are clear and tower beyond the intervening miles of sea.

Through the Sound of Trodday the Outer Island mail steamer passes, and a fleet of herring-drifters may often be seen striving to round Skye against the tide that flows so strongly here. Or the seas may be deserted save for the solans and the whales that plunge and dive on the surface of Hebridean seas.

Kilmaluaig is the township of Skye that is nearest to Trodday. The distance is not great, and with a fair wind the passage is a matter of half an hour or less. But the tidal streams here are always impetuous, and in rough weather no small boat is safe in them. The Skye fishermen call these tidal streams by the name of *amhuinn*, or river. There are three such rivers between Kilmaluaig and Trodday. Nearest to the island is MacArthur's Small River, farther out in the channel is MacArthur's Big River,

and nearer the Kilmaluaig shore is Amhuinn nan Gillean, or the River of the Lads.

In this river six lads were drowned. The short and steep crested seas leaped angrily upon their boat so that it sank, and there was sadness throughout Trotternish of Skye, and that night sorrow dwelt in many homes.

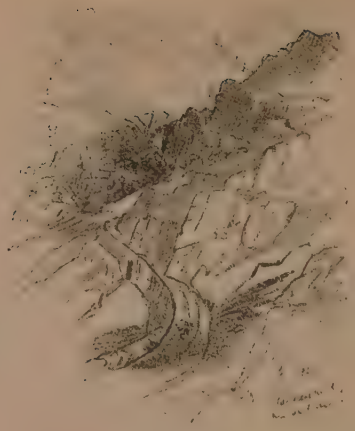
How swiftly the seas rise in these tidal streams!

Perhaps the morning has been still and the sea calm, save for the long northerly swell that is rarely absent from the Isle of Trolds. At noon, on the first of the flood, comes the dark wind from the north. Gently at first the breeze steals across the sea. As the wind freshens the small waves bear white caps, and soon they leap in a vital, tumultuous throng, glistening in the clear light which the north wind always brings to the Isles. Into this maelstrom the solans dive, throwing up the gleaming spray, and on days of late summer Arctic skuas pass upon tireless wings, while ravens haunt the shores of Trodday.

One summer evening I looked across to Trodday and the distant horizon beyond it from the high ground at Rudha Hunish. A long northerly swell rolled through the Minch. Upon Trodday it broke white, and a small boat fishing for lythe around the isle was tossed upon it like a cork. The horizon was so clear that I could see through the glass a fleet of drifters sail from the port of Stornoway. Score upon score—I counted seventy-four—they steamed or sailed eastward, some with tall dark sails that stood out against the pale blue horizon, others with grey smoke trailing from their funnels.

This was of an August night, but it is perhaps in October and November that the view from Trodday is at its best.

Then the hills of Torridon, Loch Broom, and Loch Inver are mantled with the first winter snow. But upon Trodday the grass remains green, for the tides of the Atlantic still retain much of their summer warmth, and thus the contrast between the isle and the snowy hills is all the more arresting. Aloof and icy the mountains rise, peak upon peak. Doubtless the ptarmigan still cling to that snowy wilderness and the golden eagle sails grimly across it, but the deer have descended to the low ground, the sheep have been gathered and sent to the east coast, and the hills, undisturbed, sleep their winter sleep. But here upon the Fairy Isle, the Island of Columba of the Cell, the sun shines with power even of a November noon, and at dusk the clan of the saithe leap and play upon the darkening water's surface as of an August night.



THE LOCH OF HEALING

IN Trotternish of Skye there lies, hidden in a hollow, a small loch. Its name is Loch Sianta, the Blessed Loch, and it is named so because of a well of miraculous powers which rises beside it.

Martin, writing in the opening years of the eighteenth century, says:

"The most celebrated well in Skye is Loch Siant well. It is much frequented by strangers, as well as by the inhabitants of the isle, who generally believe it to be a specifick for several diseases, such as stitches, headaches, stone, consumption, megrim. Several of the common people oblige themselves by a vow to come to this well, and make the ordinary touer about it, call'd Dessil, which is performed thus: they move thrice round the well, proceeding sunwise from east to west, and so on. This is done after drinking of the water, and when one goes away from the well it's a never-failing custom to leave some small offering on the stone which covers the well. There are nine springs issuing

out of the hill above the well, and all of them pay the tribute of their water to a rivulet which falls from the well. There is a little fresh-water lake within ten yards of the said well. It abounds with trouts, but neither the natives nor strangers will ever presume to destroy any of them, such is the esteem they have for the water. There is a small coppice near to the well, and there is none of the natives dare venture to cut the least branch of it, for fear of some signal judgement to follow upon it."

Below the Quirang the ground to the east of that hill is much broken up, and there are hollows in which a number of lochans nestle. Loch Sianta is one of these small lochs, and it is distinguished from its neighbours by the remarkable clearness of its water.

It is said by the people who live beside Loch Sianta that its waters vary little in temperature. In summer they are cold; in winter they are warm in comparison with the surrounding air.

It was wild weather on the day when first I saw Loch Sianta. A northerly gale was bringing in fierce squalls of stinging hail. On the rocky shore of the Atlantic, below the loch, great and increasing waves were breaking with a dull roar that was heard above the rush of the wind.

Upon Loch Sianta small whirlwinds played. Each of the springs that feed the loch—they are reputed to be twenty-four in number[1]—was running fast and full after much rainy weather.

Two days later the northerly wind had dropped light. The sea was calm, and except for the long combers which

[1] When he mentions only nine Martin must be referring to the chief springs.

broke lazily upon Flodigarry Island there was nothing to call to mind the great storm that so recently had swept Eilean a' Cheò.

Across the sea rose many snowy hills above Gairloch and Loch Broom. The low November sun was shining upon Rona, transforming it for the time to an isle of gold. A herring-drifter sailed south, the sun warming her crotal-coloured sail, a gleaming wave at her bow. On the southern horizon Dun Caan of Raasay rose shapely and snow-covered; northward the distant Summer Isles were dark against the snowy hills beyond them.

Loch Sianta to-day was windless. Its quiet surface from time to time was broken by a rising trout. So clear were the green-tinged depths that the trout could be seen swimming lazily. Even their spots and markings were distinct. Seemingly they had little fear, or perhaps the clearness of the water made them appear closer to the surface than they actually were.

Different by far was the setting of Loch Sianta when next, on a perfect summer evening, I looked down upon it from the narrow heathery ridge above the loch.

Southward from the Quirang each hill was clear. The giant pillars of the Stor, blue and ethereal, rose on the southern horizon. Upon *na h-Eileanan Sianta*, the Sacred Isles, far out in the Minch, thin rain was forming, transfused by the westering sun. The sea was deep blue, save where overshadowing clouds turned its waters to grey. On the hills the bell-heather was purple; the ling was in bud and the bog asphodel displayed its yellow rods. Through the hazel copse mentioned by Martin young thrushes were fluttering, their parents anxiously shepherding them.

The Pinnacles of Beinn Stor

Loch Sianta, mysterious, with grey-green depths, nestled in its secluded hollow. From the loch to the sea was a delightful mosaic. The green of the growing corn, the yellow of innumerable marigolds, the blue of the sea, the brilliant white of the waves—each colour blended with its neighbour and charmed the eye.

Close to the loch a man was stacking peats; beside him an upturned boat lay. Rona, with purple bloom upon her, was serene in soft sunlight. Far to the north stood the low coast of Lewis; north-east rose the shapely peaks of distant Sutherland.

A light breeze played upon Loch Sianta. From the well where the sick were bathed a stream of swift water gushed out. Many wild flowers grew here; cows grazed quietly beside the shore of the loch. A few trout were rising.

From Loch Sianta a clear burn seeks the sea. Where it enters the salt water the rocks are covered with the seaweed known as dulse. Where the clay has been transformed into a species of soft rock many fossils are to be seen. There are shells of various kinds, and small pieces (an inch to a couple of inches in length) of what appear to be the fossilised stems of laminarian seaweed, very curious to behold. In reality they are not seaweed, but the fossilised shells of extinct cuttle-fishes known as belemnites.

The dulse which grows beside Loch Sianta has been renowned from early times, not only in Skye but in the neighbouring isles. In *MacFarlane's Geographical Collections*, vol. ii, the following interesting account, written almost three hundred years ago with quaint spelling, is given:—

"There remains three things of which this Isle (Skye) makes its boast, and these verie remarkable in all preceding ages. It is ordinar saying with the inhabitants, that they can never be ruined as lon as these three are to the fore. The first of which is a well in the parochin of Uig, the 2nd Loughsent dulse, 3rd Hebri rock. All three within nine mile circumference. As to the first its unparalelled for its goodness, the one other excepted. The second being but ane effect of ane more noble cause we will first speak of the Cause and nixt of the effect the Cause is Loughsiant or hallowed lough in the side of it is an principall spring, beside which is a bath. This well is not only by the Inhabitants in this Isle but also by all the Aebuds and Continent esteem'd a Catholicon for all diseases which occasion the resort that is to it from all airts. Severalls by it have been restored to theur health others to engage ther coming to it ty themselves by a vow, which they endeavour to perform. The Loch will not exceed 200 paces in circumference, about it round ther are 24 springs all of which pay this Lough the tribute of there water. Its surrounded by a fair wood which none presumes to cutt and such as have attempted it, have been observed to tryste either at that or thereafter with some signall Inconvenience. As for the second thing the Dulse the water from the well running over it, gives it a yellow tincture which renders it pleasant to the taste. It is good for some diseases. There is another effect the water produces under the sands over which it runs are found stones of a finger lenth and pyrimid shape which they call bots ston because it kills worms in horse which they call bots. This is confirmed by dayli experience, they drink of the water wherin it is steeped, it

is to be found here and no where else but here. To the above mentioned Lough Mackdonald brought sevin fair trouts the product of which now innumerable."

The old account continues: "On the West of this (Loch Sianta) lyes a strong rock Bord Cruinn or Round Table according to Irish. It is Invincible, it fears no Canon one man is able to defend it against a whole fleet. There is no access to it but in one narrow place and that by climbing. It has a good well."

Bord Cruinn is the name nowadays given to MacDonald's Table. It is one of the Fladda Chuain group of isles, and lies in the Minch about five miles off the old MacDonald castle of Duntulm. The third thing, Hebri Rock, is not mentioned further. It is a low point of rock opposite the Island of Trodday, and is known as one of the best fishing places for saithe along that coast.

Let us cast our minds back to the days when the miraculous properties of Loch Sianta were implicitly believed in.

Across the Minch from Lewis a sail is seen to approach the Isle of Mist. The sky is blue; upon the long beach at Staffin small waves are drowsily breaking in white, glistening curves.

The boat approaches. Near the low rock with its luxurious growth of dulse she cautiously feels her way inshore, and when she is at anchor the crew lift out a woman, stricken with grievous illness. Over the rocks they carry her and across a grassy field.

Now the sacred loch is in view, and in a few minutes the pilgrim is laid in the bathing-place where the healing waters enfold her. Believing with faith that all will be well with her henceforth the woman is cured, and a joyful pro-

cession returns to the swaying boat upon that sunlit sea, and as the sails are set a *duan* of thanksgiving makes harmony with the murmur of the surf.

Loch Sianta is again alone.

But these days belong to the distant past. There is none now living that can tell of them, unless it be the venerable trout with which the Chief of MacDonald stocked the loch centuries ago. And trout have not the gift of human speech.

QUIRANG

FROM the northern shore of Skye there rise, in gloomy confusion, an array of rocky spires, turrets, and grotesque pillars. This is Quirang, and in its labyrinthine recesses linger many traditions.

Dr Samuel Johnson, when a stately mountain of Loch Duich was pointed out to him, disagreed with him who praised its beauty. "No, sir," he replied, "it is a gigantic protuberance." That description applies to Quirang. It is not beautiful, but upon some persons it exerts a curious fascination.

The climb into Quirang is made usually from Staffin Bay, where the Atlantic swell breaks white. From here it is no great distance to the rocks and pinnacles that are gloomy even in June sunshine. And yet, as one nears Quirang, one finds that it is a veritable rock-garden. On its steep, grassy slopes the cushion pink or moss campion

flowers so richly that of a May day the ground is purple as a heathery hillside in August, and the air is sweet with honey scent.

On the rocky ledges the roseroot blooms, and there are sprays of purple mountain saxifrage among it.

The outpost of Quirang is a massive rock known as the Prison. Tradition does not narrate why it was so called. In appearance it is not unlike some ancient fortress, grim even in sunshine. From this rock the ghost of a cleric is said to have emerged from time to time until laid to rest by some saintly man. When the traveller has passed the Prison Rock he sees, rising fair in his track, the Needle (an t-Snathad). In height it is some 120 feet, and its tapering cone is the more noteworthy because the other rocks of Quirang are bluff and blunted. As the traveller climbs to Quirang by way of Bealach a' Phriosain, or Prison Pass, he walks immediately below the Needle, which at first looms gigantic ahead, but (as he climbs above it) appears less formidable.

By a rough path the climber now enters a bewildering country, and finds himself in a land of hollows, pinnacles, and precipices.

Huge rock-masses, deeply fissured and cracked, rise on either side. Through these fissures he looks down upon the breaking surf on Staffin Bay and hears its distant music. He sees the clustered thatched houses, and, perchance, the stone near the Staffin shore where, in a small hollow, milk was each evening set down for the elfin *gruagach* before that sprite was driven by motor-cars and char-à-banc tours from Skye.

Bewildered by the strangeness of the scene the wayfarer

now arrives at the most remarkable feature of it—the Table (Am Bord). This is a mass of rock with precipitous sides, the top like a level lawn in size some 80 by 30 yards. Its green grass is a foil to the black rock-masses above. On the Table the game of shinty, which is not unlike hockey, was formerly played.

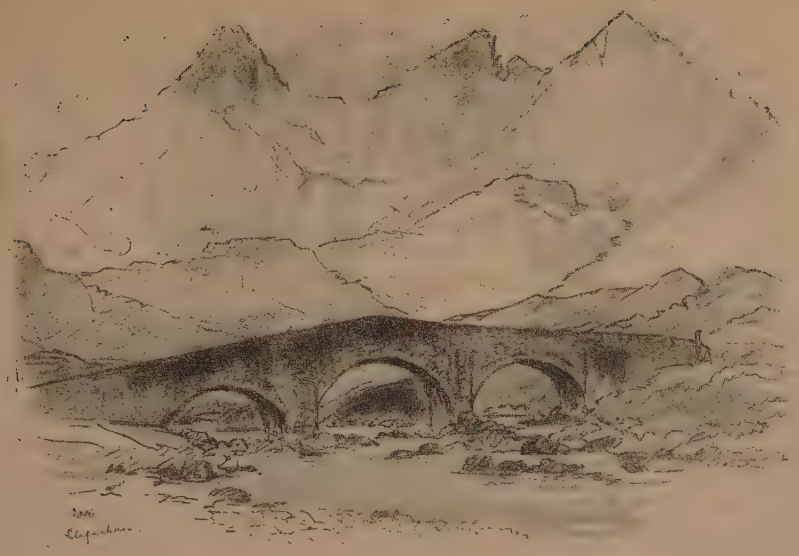
The word Quirang should properly be applied to this natural lawn alone. It is, if local tradition be credited, Cuidhe Fhraing, or Frank's Cattle-fold. Here, we are told, Frank hid the cattle he had stolen from his neighbours.

You may believe this fanciful tradition or not, as you please, but it is certain that the people of the neighbouring townships were accustomed to conceal their cattle in the recesses of Quirang when some hostile clan was abroad in their country.

Bealach a' Tuadh (the North Pass), along which the cattle were driven up from the low country by kilted herdsmen, is still known. Another relic of that time is the Barn Rock (Creag an t-Sabhail), on which the hay was kept to feed the cattle during their time in their mountain stronghold. Each rock of Quirang was formerly known to the old people by name. Two of the pillars are na Bodachan, or the Old Men. Another interesting rock is Creag a' Bhatail (Battle Rock). It is so named because of the sound it makes when a strong west wind is blowing. The people who live beneath Quirang say that in winter, when a full gale from the west is raging, Creag a' Bhatail fires two cannon-like reports in quick succession when a sudden gust strikes it. The wildly driven clouds that play about Quirang during times of storm are perhaps the smoke from that grim and lofty cannon.

Quirang is so gloomy that it is a relief to climb to the hill above it and look across a fair country, bounded by St Kilda rising faint behind the Sound of Harris. In the Minch Fladda Chuain, Iasgair, the Shiant Isles lie in sun. Far east (if the season be winter) snowy peaks rise on the horizon, and south the serrated range of the Cuillin stand against the afterglow that follows the sinking of the sun behind Vaternish.

There are rosy pools of beauty upon the tranquil Minch. Upon Rona, upon Sgeir nam Maol, the white surf breaks. But below, in Quirang, the hand of night is present, and in the twilight the Prison becomes yet more austere, and the Old Men become sunk in that great age which seems to merge with eternity.



THE BLACK WIND

From the East blows the Purple Wind,
From the South the White,
From the North the Black,
From the West the Pale.—(*Senchus Mor.*)

TO the old Celtic seers each wind was known by its own mystical colour. These colours were not woven out of human fancies; they had an occult, inner meaning.

Not to the Celts alone was the north wind black. The Romans also saw that it was dark. To them it was *aquilo*. From *aquilo* come the words *aquilus* (dark coloured) and *aquila* (the eagle, but literally the dark coloured bird).

The mystical dreamers of the Celts perceived also that white was the spiritual colour of the south wind. Here the Greeks were in harmony with them, for it is recorded that they sacrificed a white lamb to the white (the south) wind.

As I pen these lines the black wind's eldest son, White

Feet, is treading the Hebrid Sea from Tiumpan Head and Rudha Stoer south to Skye and beyond that isle. Before him he herds fast-moving snow showers—white columns that constantly change shape as they speed towards the south. So delicate, so ethereal are these drifting showers that one can imagine the *Fir Gorma* are sweeping the dust from the tireless waves on which they play of a moonlight night between Lewis and the Bespelled Isles. Some of these showers are white, others are creamy. One of them is grey; it might well be thin smoke from some passing steamship ploughing the foam-tipped seas.

Little more than an hour ago I stood upon the snowy crown above the Quirang of Eilean a' Cheò and saw, in the clear air northward, the white heights above Rudha Stoer and the Summer Isles (on which snow did not lie) rise dark against a glistening background. Southward, across Skye, MacLeod's Tables were draped in white; over each was spread a snowy cloth. Black storm clouds hid the Cuillin. The north wind must have made stern music to-day among their precipices, and from their harried spires the powdery snow must have been swept far into icy space.

As I stood above the Quirang, at a height of fifteen hundred feet above the eager waters of the Minch, a flock of snow-buntings crossed the hill-slope below me. It was curious how lustreless their white wings appeared against that snowy expanse. The flock alighted, fed restlessly for a few moments upon the seeds of the long hill grasses that thrust trembling heads above the snow, then continued their flight.

At that time the air was clear and sunny, but now, as I write, soft drifting snowflakes are veiling from my window

the sunlight that quickens the emerald waters of the Minch beyond the old castle of Duntulm. In the bay beside the castle a small herring-drifter lies at anchor, her masts and deck grey with powdered snow. Gradually the ground is whitened to the very edge of the tide, and rhythmically the white waves advance to greet the new-fallen snows.

These snows that come while autumn lingers with us have an unusual beauty. Beside the strong tides of the Atlantic they do not lie long. They are here to-day and gone to-morrow, but the memory of their virgin purity lingers after their passing.

A day of fierce storm on the black wind I recall. A tumbling glass had prepared the men of Skye for heavy weather, but the morning had dawned with the lightest of airs drifting across the sea, and at sunrise fragments of rainbows had been lighted low above the water's surface. Two hours before midday the wind freshened, veered from west through north-west to north, and in half an hour was blowing with gale force. The sky was leaden; all distant view was hidden by rain and clouds of flying spindrift. Each succeeding wave was greater than the last. Pale green walls of water advanced eagerly to the dark rocks. As they neared the cliff they appeared to pause and to crouch for their spring, then leaped upon the black walls that had withstood these white-maned horses of Manannan for so many ages.

Late that afternoon, when the flood-tide had fought its way foot by foot against the storm and at length was at the full, the spray from the great waves passed in an almost continuous cloud across Rudha Hunish. Over the grassy slopes the spray drifted in dense grey showers,

lashing the grasses so that they became withered as at midwinter.

Towards sunset a rift appeared in the racing clouds, and above the tossing waves a splendid rainbow was lighted.

What I then saw was in harmony with the spirit of the storm. A peregrine falcon shot out from his giddy perch upon the topmost pinnacle of the high rock above Rudha Hunish. His thin and pointed wings were bent back so that they almost touched his flanks. For a moment, outlined against the clouds, he hung suspended, then swerved and flew a short distance down wind. As I wondered that he had left his perch I saw a gaggle of grey geese making their way laboriously northward in the teeth of the gale. Grimly the falcon awaited their coming. The geese did not see him until he descended like a thunderbolt in their midst. I expected to see one of the geese fall, but, either because he had noticed me standing below him in the midst of his stoop, or because he had misjudged the strength of the gale, the peregrine missed his quarry, and the geese, calling loudly and excitedly, scattered at once. Against that wind even the peregrine could not hope to overtake them, and returning sullenly to his dark perch he faced the squall of hail that now rushed on the black wind across the headland.

The geese and a few solans were the only birds abroad on this day of storm. A pigeon was standing upon a narrow ledge of rock. It feared to move, for had it attempted to fly it must have been swept away like a leaf.

At dusk a curious frothy smell hung above the narrow gulleys. Here the waves flowed in with milky-white overfalls. Many stems of laminarian seaweed had been torn

from their moorings by the huge seas, and now lay piled upon the rounded, slippery pebbles. Each wave as it leaped high over the rocks threw fronds and stems of sea-weed far into the air. As that great gale swept broad pathways through the forests of the land so did it, through the waves it had formed, devastate the forests beneath the sea.

At high-tide I looked, from a little hill, across the tumbling surf. From the headland itself I had been driven by the great and increasing waves that threw their spray high above my head, and caused Dileas my collie to shiver with fear. The tide was now so high that each sea battered the headland, and sheets of spray drifted like mist across the boggy land where in fine weather snipe have their home. Some of the greater waves broke with a force that called to mind the explosions from the floating mines with which the seas were strewn during the Great War. Manannan himself, god of the ocean, could scarce have urged his chariot across those waves which the black wind was driving in confused, sullen ranks southward.

The morning following the storm broke calm. Gone were the great waves; there remained only a gentle swell that broke in long, white combers below the cliffs. The autumn sun shone brightly upon the blue sea, above which an unending procession of migrating sea-birds were flighting south. The feathered travellers were mainly kittiwake gulls and guillemots, and the low sun lit up their plumage as they passed.

But it is not always that the black wind brings rain and impetuous seas to the Isle of Mist. More often it is the bearer of fine weather—of clear air and rare visibility.

It is usually on nights of north wind that the aurora is seen. The weather-wise were accustomed to watch closely the appearance of the aurora or northern lights. When reddish rays appeared and gave place to others of darker hue it was believed that bad weather, which would last for some time, was approaching.

One night of early winter the aurora on the black wind was unusually impressive. With the coming of darkness a wide arc of green, ghostly light stretched across the northern horizon, dimming the stars and the bright flashes of the Scalpay light across the Minch. From this luminous band of palest green, narrow streamers of light leaped into space, as though giant searchlights were sweeping the northern sky. Later in the evening the character of the display changed. The glow was scarcely so bright; the streamers were gone, but luminous pools, calling to mind mackerel clouds that presage rain, lay upon the sky from the northern horizon to the zenith. They flickered, died away, then reappeared to pursue one another madly like gigantic "wills-o'-the-wisp" across the infinite space of the heavens. Momentarily the merry dancers shone behind the old castle of Duntulm so that its jagged walls rose up black as night. Then the mysterious revellers hastened to another part of the heavens, and the castle showed no longer.

At midnight I looked across the Minch from my window. From a rift in the mist a flood of aurora light streamed down upon the sea, as through passing clouds a wide beam of sunshine may be seen sometimes to pour earthward. That great ray was arrestingly beautiful when seen through the lonely darkness of a winter's night. It was as if the searchlight of some great airship were trained upon the

sleeping waters, troubled by a bitter and increasing wind.

Another day of the black wind I recall. In Skye the sun shone brightly, but over Harris a great cloud, dark and ominous, floated throughout the day. Backwards and forwards this cloud drifted idly, and from it torrential rain descended. The Minch was pale green, and Fladda, with purple bloom upon it, was outlined against the storm.

On the far northern horizon white streaks of snow fell seaward, and when a shaft of sunlight shone diagonally upon these lines of snow the Cross of Saint Andrew was suddenly formed, as it appeared to Achaius, King of Scots, and Hungus, King of Picts, on the eve of their great battle with Athelstan of England. At the base of the cross a fragment of rainbow burned mistily upon seas that were oppressed by the vast cloud canopy that hung above them. West and north the sky was so dark that it was a relief to look southward, for in that direction magnificent cumulus clouds towered into the blue of the sky.

At this time the black wind persisted day after day. It brought sometimes snow and storm, sometimes sunshine and clear weather. Daily the snowy covering upon the Black Cuillin thickened, and one afternoon, when the storm clouds of the morning lifted, the white spires of the Cuillin rose, like some polar range, against the blue of the autumn sky.

The beauty of these needle-like peaks was startling. The hills were in shadow, but on the ridges the low sun shone. On these ridges the snow was white; the snowy corries, deep in shade, were a dark blue-grey.

At sunset that day again I came in sight of the Cuillin.

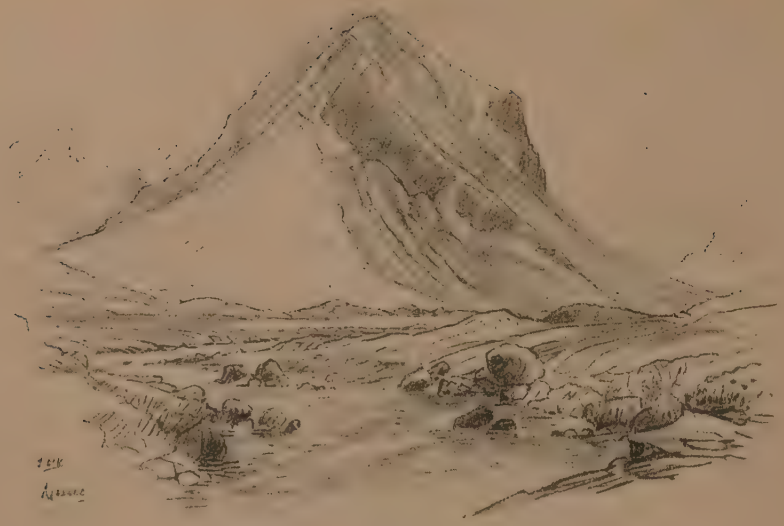
They then appeared not as hills but as clouds. In a white-robed company they rose, clear-cut yet mysterious, on the far horizon. Beneath the Cuillin stands an ancient castle where lived the possessor of a magic harp. That harp had one string of iron, one of bronze, and one of silver, and in an old twelfth-century poem the harp and its magic properties are thus described:

> The harp was one of three strings,
> Methinks it was a pleasant jewel—
> A string of iron, a string of noble bronze,
> And a string of entire silver.
> The names of the not heavy strings
> Were Suantorrgles, Geantorrgles the great;
> Goiltorrgles was the other string
> Which sends all men to crying.
> If the pure Goiltorrgles be played
> For the heavy hosts of the earth,
> The hosts of the world without delay
> Would all be sent to constant crying.
> If the merry Geantorrgles be played
> For the hosts of the earth, without heavy execution
> They would all be laughing from it,
> From the hour of one day to the same of the next.
> If the free Suantorrgles were played
> To the hosts of the wide universe,
> The men of the world—great the wonder—
> Would fall into a long sleep.

At last, after many weeks, the reign of the black wind ended. One day, early in November, his brother the white wind sped eagerly northward. The morning of his coming had been cloudless, and before dawn Mars had awakened me by his ruddy light as he steered west high above the dark waters of the sleeping Minch. By noon the sky was grey and lowering, and the south wind momently increased in strength. Early that afternoon the Cuillin were

the abode of the storm spirit. The white wind from the south was lifting the snow that had been driven by the black wind to the southern slopes, and now hurled it high into the air toward the north whence it had come. Each peak was enveloped in a cloud of fine, drifting snow. Upon Sgurr nan Gillean the driven snow was rising to a height of several hundred feet above the hill-top. Against the leaden sky that cloud of furiously whirling snow was a ghostly and arresting spectacle; that day no climber who had ventured upon the Cuillin could have remained alive for long on the high tops.

Thus the white wind for a time replaced the black, but even in June the north wind may return to whiten the spires of the Cuillin, and since its birthplace is amid polar wastes, its breath, even at midsummer, is chill across western sea-lochs and lonely Highland glens.



FAIRY LORE OF SKYE

SINCE Skye is the Land of Shadows, the Isle of Mist and of Wings, it is but natural that the fairies should linger here. In the corries of the Cuillin when the thunder rolls on a winter storm, beside the sounding bay at Staffin where the white waves from Lochlann break in foam, upon the field of purple heather that crowns Dunvegan Head, on the blue waters of Wester Fjord where the swell wets the skirts of MacLeod's Maidens—in all these places the fairies still dwell. In the parish of Saint Mary's Church a sad and lonely sprite[1] enters the houses at dead of night. While the inmates are sleeping this wandering fairy crouches over the peat fire and croons:

Ni mise mo gharadh
's mo theodhagan
Nuair bhios cach n'an
Cadal suaimhneach.

[1] This elf's name is An Teoagan.

I will do my warming
And my heating
While others shall be in their
Sound sleep.

In the Isle of Skye mortals and fairies loved one another. It is told of one man that in his youth he had a fairy sweetheart. Later he married a mortal wife, but at times when he sat with his family around the peat fire he became suddenly full of unrest. Those in the house heard the sound as of a soft wind sighing without, but the man himself, rising from his bench, wandered out to the moor, and in the greyness of twilight over land and sea communed with his spirit lover as she floated at his side.

Most of the fairy clans were friendly to man.

One night a Skye lad was returning from his fishing on the rocks. Rain had fallen heavily, and when the boy reached a burn he found it so swollen that he was unable to cross it. The youngster was in great distress, and as he stood there dejectedly a fairy appeared, and before he knew it he found himself on the farther side of the burn.

Then there was the affair of the Bathach Mhor Mhinginish (the Great Byre of Minginish). A man of Minginish was ordered to build a byre which should hold as many cows as there are days in the year. When the walls were finished he found it impossible to put a roof on the building on account of its size. He was desperate, but as he returned home from his work one night he almost stumbled upon a fairy. He caught the elf and carried it home with him. That night the fairy clan swarmed round his house, calling for their captive brother. The man told the agitated elves that he would liberate the fairy he had captured only on

condition that they should roof the Great Byre for him. They agreed, and on going to the building next morning he found it completed.

A widow living beneath Dun Bornaskitag was making slow progress at her harvest. By moonlight the fairies came, and in the morning when she looked out all her oats were cut and bound into sheaves.

Two men of the township of Digg were digging with the *cas chrom* one warm spring day. One expressed the wish that he had a drink of buttermilk. Scarcely had he uttered the words when a young woman appeared with the drink he had longed for. He drank gratefully, and no sooner had he done so than he saw an army of fairies throwing their fairy darts at his companion, who had refused to drink the buttermilk.

When fairies had work of their own to do they came on moonlight nights, and as they wished to be undisturbed they resented mortals working by moonlight at their harvest.

In Herbusta a man and his wife were reaping corn with the sickle by the light of the moon in Buaile an t-Sagairt (the Priest's Field). Suddenly the man felt the sickle drop from his hand. He then noticed that his hand was cut. Fearing the fairies were present and were displeased with him because of his moonlight labours he went home. Next morning, when he returned to the field, he saw a *saighead sithe* or fairy arrow in the place where he had felt the blow the previous night.

These fairy darts are found in various places in Skye.

On a knoll at Kensaleyre, at the head of Loch Snizort, are stone hammer-heads, which are accounted for by the following legend. One day the fairies were gathering limpets on

the shore here. They were using their hammers to knock the limpets off the rock. As they worked Fionn (Fingal) suddenly appeared. The fairies, affrighted, threw down their hammers and fled, nor did they ever return for them.

The *Each Uisge*, or Water Horse, is still firmly believed in by many people in the Isle of Skye. He usually took the form of a magnificent black steed, but without a mane. He used to assume human form at will. A woman was out on the moor early one summer morning. She was met by a handsome stranger who made love to her. They sat down, and the man laid his head on her lap. The woman was stroking his hair when suddenly she noticed sand in it. Her suspicions were aroused, but she continued to fondle him until he fell asleep. Then she succeeded in slipping off the apron upon which his head rested without awakening him, and fled homeward. As she neared her village she heard the infuriated *each uisge* neighing shrilly as he galloped after her, but she was able to reach home before he overtook her.

Immediately beneath the hill of Trotternish, known as Suidhe Fhinn (Fingal's Seat), lies Loch Sneasdal. It is a gloomy loch, hidden in a dark corrie on which the sun rarely shines. Here an *each uisge* had his home. Thither he used to bear wanderers, whom he enticed upon his broad back, and then, plunging beneath the peaty waters, drowned his unsuspecting victims. From Loch Sneasdal a pass leading to the hill is still known as Bealach na Beiste, or the Monster's Pass. It was by this steep pass that the water horse used to climb to the high ground in search of prey. But even so savage and relentless a creature as the water

horse has his finer qualities, and in Trotternish is still sung a poem that was composed by a lonely *each uisge*.

Sometimes when a mother left her baby unattended on the hillside fairies passed that way. They took the unguarded baby, and in its place they left a changeling. This 'changing' has been immortalised in some of our most beautiful Gaelic songs.

A woman once gave her child into a neighbour's charge. The neighbour (though she did not admit this) must have left the baby by itself and so allowed the fairies to substitute a child of their own, for an hour or so afterwards the child sat up in its cradle and began to play a *feadan*, or reed pipe. The child's mother when she returned found the baby thus employed, and at once knew it for a changeling. She snatched it from the cradle, and was about to throw it into the river when a knoll on the hillside opened and invisible hands placed her own child before her.

Fairies were friendly and obliging for the most part, and there was no task too arduous for them. One day a man who had been annoyed by the fairies constantly demanding work gave them three tasks, each one more difficult than the last. The first two they accomplished, but when he gave them some creels without bottoms and told them to empty the Minch, they went off in high dudgeon and never offered to work for him again.

THE SKYE GATHERING

EVEN in early times there were Highland gatherings in Skye. There is a record of one such meeting. It was held below the castle of Dunvegan, probably in the time of Tormod, who became the tenth chief of MacLeod about the middle of the sixteenth century.

In those days there were no roads in Skye. The preparations for this Highland meeting must therefore have been lengthy. First, messengers must have been sent by sea to the neighbouring islands and to the mainland to invite friendly chiefs and chieftains to the sports, and then, days before the actual gathering, those chiefs must have sailed up Loch Dunvegan in their galleys, with their pipers playing (one might say almost furtively, because they were approaching the home of MacCrimmon, the most celebrated piper of them all), and were the guests of MacLeod until the day of the contests.

To this Skye Gathering of the sixteenth century MacCalein, chief of the Campbells, came all the way from Argyll, no doubt sailing from Inveraray in his galley.

MacDonnell of Glengarry, MacLeod of Raasay, and many other chiefs were present, and it was a gay and gallant company that assembled on the shore, below the old castle, that summer morning four hundred years ago.

One after the other the events were decided, and after an Argyll man had put the stone farther than anyone else, and one of Raasay's men had been supreme in wrestling, MacCalein said slightingly to MacLeod (who had entered no one for any of the contests), "I would like, MacLeod, to see your best man compete with mine, and with Raasay's yonder."

MacLeod was not slow to accept the challenge. He had in his service one named Pòl Crubach (Paul the Cripple), who was of enormous strength. This cripple, meanly dressed and insignificant in appearance, then stood out in the arena, and as he appeared there was a shout of derision from the successful athletes who were lounging gracefully in the warm sunshine. Pòl, nothing daunted, first put the weight farther than Argyll's champion, then, after a strenuous bout, overthrew the wrestler of MacLeod of Raasay. Thus the honour of Dunvegan was upheld.

It is pleasant to think that this may have been the origin of the Skye Gathering that is held each summer at Portree at the end of August. No Scottish meeting is held in so truly Highland an atmosphere as the Skye Gathering.

Picture a small grass-crowned hill sloping to the green waters of the sea. To the south the view is bounded by the Cuillin hills, that rise to grey skies through low, encircling mists or (on a fine August morning of south wind) stand clear in mellow sunlight. To the west are lesser hills, purple with the rich bloom of heather. East are dark

cliffs, the former home of the erne, where the swell breaks white.

At the Skye Gathering there are no grand stands, no lines of motor-cars, no disquieting side shows. The spectators sit upon grassy banks, on a rocky terrace which closely overlooks the gathering ground. Every spectator is keenly interested in the piping, dancing, and athletic events. A delightfully friendly atmosphere pervades the gathering. Skye being an island, every one knows every one else, and there is much hand-shaking and much animated Gaelic conversation.

Piping in Skye is not what it was when the MacCrimmons had their college at Boreraig, but so strong is the MacCrimmon tradition that Skye is still the Mecca of pipers, who journey from all parts of Scotland by sea and by land to compete for the Dunvegan gold medal in *ceòl mór*.

One hears at the Skye Gathering two forms of pipe music. The first is *pìobaireachd* (Anglicé, pibroch), the second is march, strathspey, and reel.

Pibroch (I spell it here in its English form) is not easy to follow and understand. Indeed, at most Highland gatherings but little attention is paid to it. The time of pibroch playing is the appropriate moment to discuss your latest grouse bags with your neighbour, or, if you are a lady, to engage in harmless gossip. But at the Skye Gathering it is pleasant for lovers of the old pipe music to see the ladies of the well-known island families seat themselves together, where there is little danger of their being disturbed, and listen to ancient pibroch tunes with the sadness of sea sorrow in them.

To judge a pibroch competition fairly it is necessary

that the judges (who at the Skye Gathering are usually amateur pipers) should be able to play each tune which they hear.

Thirty or forty years ago the piping judges were sometimes persons little qualified for their task. There is a story that old Callum MacPherson—he who was usually known as Callum Piobaire [1]—on one occasion astonished the judges by remarking to them that they "knew as much about pibroch as pibroch knew about them—which was very little!" Callum MacPherson's grandson has of late years rapidly reached the front rank of pipers.

Two of the best pipers of the day—George MacLennan of Aberdeen and John MacDonald of Inverness—have competed regularly at the Skye Gathering during recent years, and Pipe-Major William Ross, late of the Scots Guards and now instructor to the Piobaireachd Society, has been as successful here as elsewhere. It would be of great interest could these pipers, by some magic shifting of the hands of time, play against the MacCrimmons of a past age. It would thus be seen how the art of piping has fared during the last three or four centuries. It must be borne in mind (as I have mentioned in another chapter) that the MacCrimmons gave their whole lives to the practice and teaching of pipe music, while at the present day a piper plays as a relaxation, unless he be a piper in some Highland regiment. The composition of pibroch has now entirely died out, and it is a reproach to Scotland that the leading exponent of pipe music of the day has perforce to follow other work in order to earn his livelihood.

One pibroch I recall that was played in an outstanding

[1] *I.e.* Callum the Piper.

manner at the Skye Gathering. It was in 1926, and the player was George MacLennan. Geordie, as he is called, had been very ill for two years, and so it was pleasant to hear his pipe again. The pibroch he played was Padraig Mór MacCrimmon's masterpiece, "The Lament for the Children," composed beside Dunvegan three hundred years ago. It is a long tune—very beautiful, very difficult to play, and very wearisome to listen to if played indifferently. As MacLennan played he entered into the spirit of the tune. With perfect execution, with great feeling, with faultless rhythm, he played so that he might have been inspired by the shade of Padraig Mór himself.

At the Skye Gathering one sees the Highland sport of tossing the cabar. The cabar (its first "a" should be pronounced as in "father," and not as in "haven") is the trunk of a tree stripped of bark and branches. Holding it vertically by its heavy end the would-be tosser first walks forward guardedly until he has the cabar nicely balanced, then runs ever faster, all the while carefully balancing the cabar in a vertical position. While running at top speed he throws it violently from him so that its lighter top end first strikes the ground, and the upward jerk he has given it causes the heavy end of the cabar to fall away from him. The cabar has thus made a complete turn.

An ordinary mortal would have as much hope of tossing the cabar as he would of scaling unaided a thousand-foot precipice. It is a sport for the most powerful persons, and even they have many failures, the cabar time after time falling back toward the athlete. If the cabar entirely defeats all who strive to toss it a piece is sawn off its end to lighten it. It is amusing to note that it may take four ordinary

mortals to carry the tree to the giant who is preparing mightily to toss it.

With the dancing of the Highland Fling, Strathspey, and Reel of Tulloch, putting the stone (which is an old Highland feat of strength), and other athletic contests, the Skye Gathering passes all too quickly, and as the shadows of the Cuillin lengthen the prizes are presented, and the people make their way to their distant homes, discussing the various events of a day that is memorable in their quiet lives.

EPILOGUE

SGEIR NAM MAOL

(A NORTHERN OUTPOST OF SKYE)

THE sound of waves, unceasingly hurling themselves against a dark rock, far from land.

Faintly pencilled the hills of Sutherland in thin blue haze.

The mellow September light upon the sea.

A small boat swaying at anchor.

A huge bull grey seal regarding it solemn-eyed from the green depths. A brown seal lying upon dark sea-wrack where clustered turnstones twitter.

Clisham of Harris rising sentinel over the Minch.

The sky quiet, dappled.

Sparkling in sunlight come the waves.

Solans, strong-winged and determined, passing low above the water for St Kilda, invisible beyond Harris.

A single fulmar flying, owl-like, east.

The sheer rock-face of MacDonald's Table black against the noontide sun. On the west horizon Beinn Mhor and Hecla of South Uist.

Eaval of North Uist rising like some stack from the blue sea. A vital breeze from Lochlann stirring the Minch.

The Shiant Isles dappled with sun and shade.

Rocks, with barnacles thick upon them, showing grey beneath the tide.

The flood streaming north-east.

Eagerly the waves roll in; eagerly they pass.

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